



French Alps & the Jura Mountains

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Why Go?

The French Alps are a place of boundless natural beauty. Whether music to your ears is schussing through virgin snow in Chamonix – see our ski trip planning tips on p520 – the rhythm of boots on a lonesome mountain pass, or the silence of a summer's morning as the first rays illuminate Mont Blanc – no lyrics can do these mountains justice. Here a symphony of colossal peaks and glaciers, epic drops and climbs will elevate you, seduce your senses, make your heart pound and leave you crying 'encore!' like few other places on earth.

Now turn your gaze north to the Jura Mountains, like a landscape painting come to life with its vineyards cascading down hillsides, sun-dappled forests and jewel-like lakes. Slip into the picture by visiting dairy farms, tasting fragrant *vin jaune* (yellow wine) in local wineries and cross-country skiing in quiet exhilaration. Unlike the Alps, this region won't leave you breathless, but it will leave you thinking, 'Ahhh, *c'est la vie...*'

Best Places to Eat

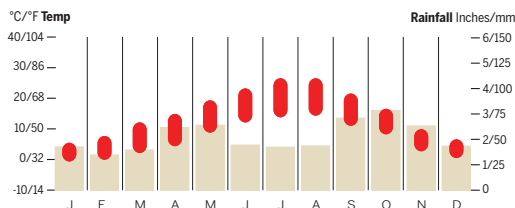
- » Les Vieilles Luges (p473)
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When to Go

Grenoble



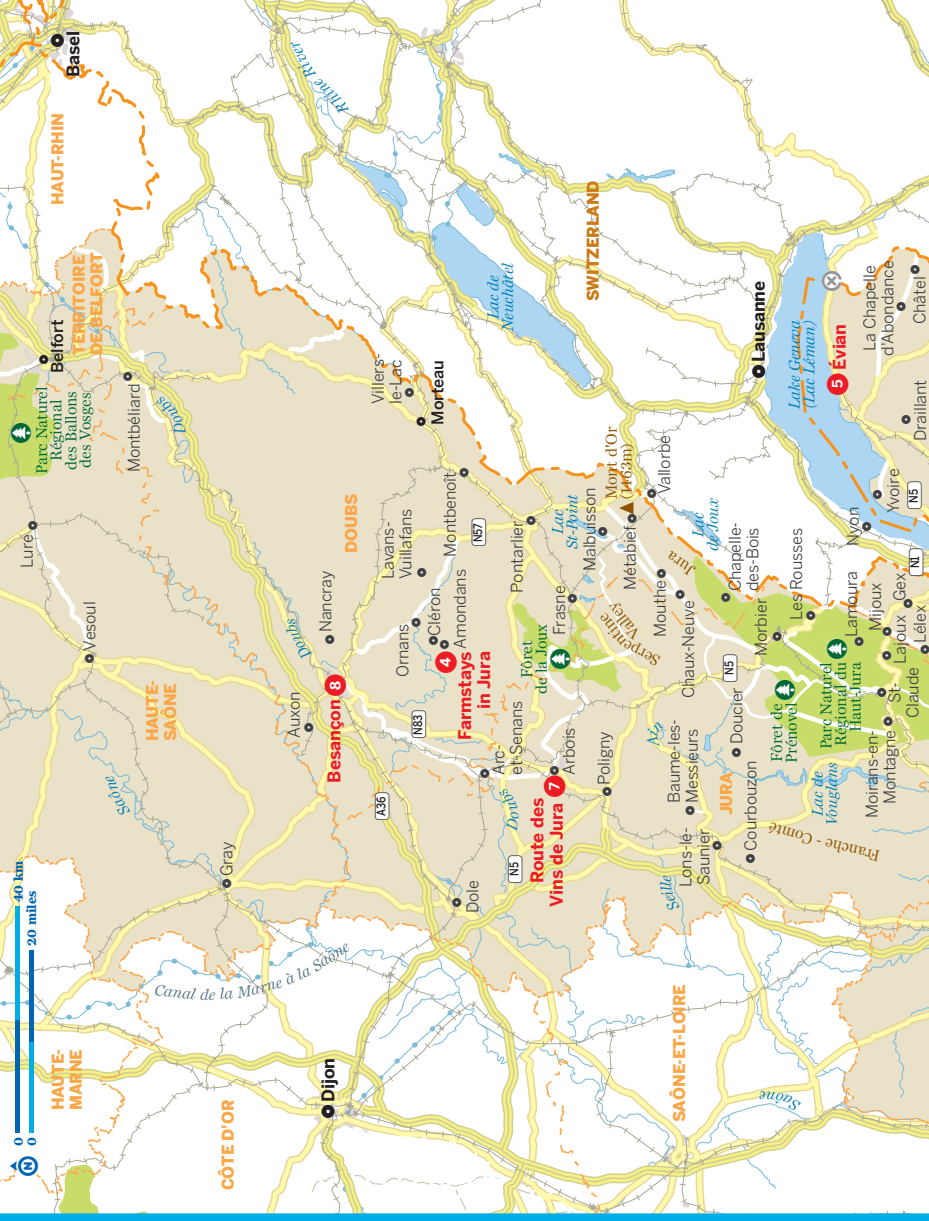
March Grenoble's Jazz Festival and fits of giggles at Méribel's Altitude Festival.

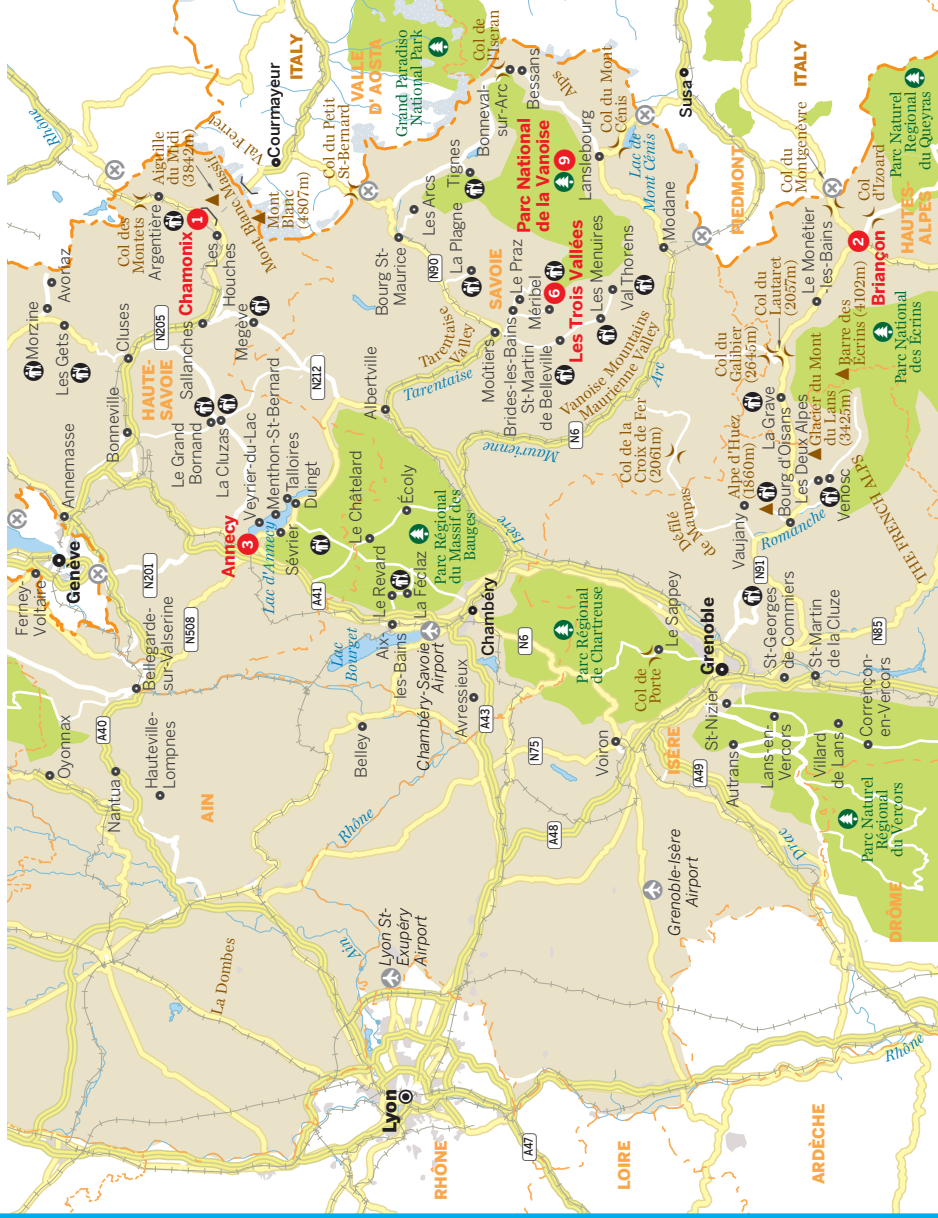
July to August The Tour de France, and fireworks light up Anney at the Fête du Lac.

December Championships, freestyle events and fun as the first snow hits the Alps.

French Alps & the Jura Mountains Highlights

- 1** Do a Bondi swooshing down the slopes in **Chamonix** (p467) in the distinctive shadow of Mont Blanc
- 2** Get dizzy on the winding drive to **Briançon** (p505) through the dramatic Parc National des Écrins
- 3** Delve into castles, medieval lanes and a crystal-clear lake in dreamy **Annecy** (p480)
- 4** Scamper back to nature at a middle-of-nowhere farm in **Jura** (p514)
- 5** Bathe like royalty in the mineral-rich waters of **Évian-les-Bains** (p480)
- 6** Party waay past your bedtime in Méribel and celebrity-





mad Courchevel in
Les Trois Vallées
(p489)

7 Sip golden *vin jaune* amid the vines on the bucolic **Route des Vins de Jura** (p514)

8 Seek out the Vauban citadel and the stellar Musée des Beaux-Arts in **Besançon** (p507)

9 Grab your walking boots to explore the glaciated grandeur of **Parc National de la Vanoise** (p495)

History

Migrant tribes of Celtic, Gaulish and Teutonic origin arrived in the Alps first; by the time of Christ, communities were well established, especially around the lakes of Geneva and Annecy.

During the Roman conquest the Alps were a strategic stronghold, falling under Roman control during Augustus' reign. The Frankish kings of the Merovingian and Carolingian empires laid the foundations for the modern Alps with their distinctive dialects, traditions and cultures.

The 13th and 14th centuries saw the feudal houses of Savoy, the Dauphiné and Provence fiercely contesting the Alps. The ensuing centuries were marked by successive wars and occupations, a cycle which ended with the union of Savoy with France in 1860.

Michel-Gabriel Paccard and Jacques Balmat made the first successful ascent of Mont Blanc in 1786, and in the late 19th century holidaymakers began to flock to the area.

German and Italian forces occupied the Alps during WWII, while the mountains became one of the main strongholds for the French Resistance. Modern industry, hydroelectric energy and large-scale tourism all contributed to the regeneration of the Alps in the postwar years.

Climate

Snow covers even lower-altitude stations most years from December to April. Weather conditions can change alarmingly quickly in the Alps. Pick up the latest weather report at the tourist office or your hotel reception, or click on www.meteofrance.com (in French).

National & Regional Parks

Wildlife is carefully protected in two national parks, Vanoise (east of Chambéry) and Écrins (southeast of Grenoble), both close to the Italian border, where you may well spot chamois, ibex, marmots and golden eagles. With four regional parks – Queyras (south of Briançon), the Vercors (southwest of Grenoble), Chartreuse (north of the Vercors) and Massif des Bauges (north of the Chartreuse) – the Alps has France's greatest concentration of parks.

The Jura is home to the Parc Naturel Régional du Haut-Jura.

Dangers & Annoyances

Avalanches are a serious danger in snow-bound areas and can be fatal. You know the golden rule: never ski, hike or climb alone. Off-piste skiers should never leave home without an avalanche pole, avalanche transceiver, a shovel – and, most importantly, a professional guide. Ski resorts announce the daily risk through signs and coloured flags:

Yellow Low risk

Black and yellow Heightened risk

Black Severe risk

Henry's Avalanche Talk (www.henrysavalanchetalk.com) translates the daily avalanche forecast issued by Météo France into English during the ski season.

At high altitudes, where the UV rays are stronger and intensified by snow glare, wear sunglasses and sunscreen. The air is dry in the Alps, so stay hydrated by drinking plenty of water. Always bring extra layers too: the weather can turn very suddenly.

Skiing & Snowboarding

The 200-plus resorts in the French Alps have carved out their reputation for some of the best – perhaps *the* best – downhill skiing and snowboarding in Europe. The season begins with the first big snow (usually around mid-December) and ends in late April or early May. For fewer crowds and the best deals, avoid skiing in high season, namely Christmas, New Year and French school holidays.

Dependent on snow conditions, summer alpine skiing on glaciers in high-altitude resorts Val d'Isère, Les Deux Alpes and Alpe d'Huez runs for anything from two weeks to two months, June to August.

Skis (alpine, cross-country, telemark), snowboards, boots, poles and helmets can be hired at sport shops in every resort. All-inclusive rental costs around €32/175 per day/six days for alpine equipment and snowboarding gear and €15/65 for cross-country; reserving in advance online typically gets you a 15% discount.

Downhill runs are colour-coded to indicate how kid-easy or killer-hard they are:

Green Beginners

Blue Intermediate

Red Advanced

Black Tough as hell

WHAT'S THE ALTERNATIVE?

There's so much more to the mountains than winter skiing and summer hiking. Here are some ideas for an action- and fun-packed holiday.

Winter

Cross-country skiing is cheaper and greener than alpine skiing; not much beats gliding through snow-dusted forests in quiet exhilaration. Try it in the Jura or Savoie Grand Révard.

For wilderness and glorious virgin powder, enlist the help of a guide to go **ski touring** in resorts like Chamonix and Val d'Isère. Or strap on snowshoes to make twinkly tracks away from the crowds; most resorts now have dedicated **snowshoeing** routes and tours.

For a bump-a-minute buzz, *la luge* (**sledging**) on a variety of contraptions is all the rage, and most major resorts have tree-lined runs where you can go whizzing off down the mountains.

Sliding still, you can learn the exhilarating and – phew! – tiring art of **mushing** in Chamonix and Les Trois Vallées.

Summer

Take to the waters or the skies. Wherever there is a river, you'll find **water sports** like white-water rafting, kayaking, canoeing and canyoning; and wherever there is a beautiful breeze and a mountain, there's tandem **paragliding**. Speed-fiends can replace their skis with downhill **mountain bikes** when the snow melts. These activities are available in almost every alpine resort.

Summer glacial skiing is on short greens or blues. Snowboarders are brilliantly catered for in larger resorts with snowparks kitted out with half-pipes, kickers and ramps. Jura excels in scenic rambling cross-country (*ski de fond*) trails.

France's leading ski school, the **École du Ski Français** (ESF; www.esf.net) – its instructors wear red – teaches snowboarding and skiing. It has a branch in every resort and touts competitive rates; a group lesson typically costs €60 per half-day, €143 for four days and €183 for six days. Private instruction is available on request. Kids can start learning from the age of four; from three years old they can play in the *jardin de neige* (snow garden).

LIFT PASSES

You will need a lift pass (*forfait*) to ride the various *remontées mécaniques* (drag lifts), *télesieges* (chairlifts), *télécabines*, (gondolas), *téléphériques* (cable cars) and *funiculaires* (funicular railways).

Passes – a big chunk out of your budget, €200 or thereabouts for a week – give access to one or more ski sectors. Most lift passes are 'hands-free', with a built-in chip that barriers detect automatically, and can be bought and recharged online. For multi-

day/seasonal lift passes, you may need a passport-sized photo.

Children aged under five ski for free but still need a pass; bring along a passport as proof of age.

Cheaper passes – usually around €6 a day – are needed for cross-country ski trails, although these are rarely checked.

INSURANCE

Before you launch yourself like a rocket down that near-vertical black piste, make sure you are properly insured. Accidents happen and expensive (we're talking triple figures here) mountain-rescue costs, medical treatment and repatriation add insult to injury. Rental shops offer insurance for equipment for a small additional charge.

Most packages include insurance or you might have the **Carte Neige** (www.ffs.fr/site/carteneige, in French), a comprehensive annual policy. It costs €33 to €42 per year (€27 for cross-country skiing only), depending on the level of cover you choose. You can buy it online or through the ESF in most resorts.

Alternatively, buy the **Carré Neige** (www.carreneige.com) with your lift pass. Every resort offers the all-inclusive insurance scheme, which costs €2.70 a day.

TICKET TO GLIDE

RESORT	ELEVATION (M)	LEVEL	RUNS (KM)	1-DAY LIFT PASS (€)	6-DAY LIFT PASS (€)
Chamonix	1037	intermediate, advanced, off-piste	182	50	240
St-Gervais & Megève	810 & 1113	beginner, intermediate	445	37	176
Les Portes du Soleil	1000-2466	all levels	650	40	205
Les Trois Vallées	1450-2300	all levels, especially advanced	600	47	220
Val d'Isère	1850	intermediate, advanced, off-piste	300	45	219
Les Deux Alpes	1660	intermediate, advanced, snowboarding	225	40	189
Alpe d'Huez	1860	all abilities, snowboarding, Europe's longest black run	245	41	210
La Clusaz	1100	beginner, families	128	30	158
Serre-Chevalier	1200	all levels, off-piste	250	41	195
Le Grand Bornand	1000	beginner, intermediate	90	28	132
Chamrousse	1700	beginner, intermediate	90	17	102
Métabief Mont d'Or	1000	cross-country	210	5.50	30

i Getting There & Away

AIR The view through the plane window is the best introduction to the Alps: chances are you're landing at **Lyon St-Exupéry Airport** (www.lyon.aeroport.fr), 25km east of Lyon; **Grenoble Airport** (www.grenoble-airport.com), further south; or **Geneva Airport** (www.gva.ch), in neighbouring Switzerland.

BUS From the airports there are buses to numerous ski resorts with Geneva's **Aeroski-Bus** (www.alpski-bus.com) and Lyon's **Satobus-Alpes** (<http://satobus-alpes.altibus.com>); fares and frequencies are listed under Getting There & Away for destinations in this chapter.

CAR & MOTORCYCLE Traffic on steeply climbing, winding mountain roads can be hellish, especially at weekends. After heavy snowfalls, you may need snow chains. Winter tyres (automatically provided with most hire cars) are a good

idea. The Fréjus and Mont Blanc road tunnels connect the French Alps with Italy, as do several mountain passes. Road signs indicate if passes are blocked.

TRAIN Eurostar (www.eurostar.com) ski trains provide a more environment-friendly alternative between London and Môtiers or Bourg St-Maurice from mid-December to mid-April (return from €150, eight hours, overnight or day service, weekends only). Within France, train services to the Alps are excellent.

SAVOY

'The Alps par excellence' could be the strap line of this northern half of the French Alps, a perfectly executed landscape of wondrous peaks, glassy lakes, dense alpine forests and everlasting snow.

Flanked by Switzerland and Italy, Savoy (Savoie, pronounced sav-wa) rises from the southern shores of Lake Geneva, Europe's largest alpine lake, and culminates at the roof of Europe, mighty 4810m Mont Blanc. In between is a sprinkling of ski resorts such as Chamonix and party-central Val d'Isère, as well as some historical châteaux towns like Chambéry and lakeside Annecy to the southwest.

Rural life, unchanged for centuries, characterises the region's most remote realms like the Bauges massif (so little known it is often mistaken for the northeastern Vosges region), and the wild Parc National de la Vanoise.

Chamonix

POP 9400 / ELEV 1037M

With the pearly white peaks of the Mont Blanc massif as its sensational backdrop, being an icon comes naturally to Chamonix. First 'discovered' by Brits William Windham and Richard Pococke in 1741, this is the mecca of mountaineering, its birthplace, its flag-bearer. It is also a wintertime playground of epic proportions that entices Olympic champions and hard-core skiers to its pistes, and party-mad boarders to its boot-stompin' bars.

Even if you and your karabiner aren't quite ready to scale 'the big one' just yet and your technique doesn't *quite* match that of 007 in his stunt-riddled ski chase in *The World Is Not Enough*, there is no resisting the gravitational pull of those mountains. Whether slaloming La Vallée Blanche like a pro or almost colliding with perpendicular cliffs on the vertigo-inducing Aiguille du Midi cable car, there's a whole lot of adrenalin and, yes, a dash of Bond in every trip to Chamonix.

Sights

Pay for one Chamonix museum and visit the other for free. Discounts also apply for *carte d'hôte* pass-holders.



Aiguille du Midi

VIEWPOINT

A jagged needle of rock rearing above glaciers, snowfields and rocky crags, 8km from the hump of Mont Blanc, the Aiguille du Midi (3842m) is one of Chamonix' most distinctive landmarks. If you can handle the height, the 360-degree views of the French, Swiss and Italian Alps from the summit are (quite literally) breathtaking.

Year-round the vertiginous **Téléphérique de l'Aiguille du Midi** (🗺advance reservations 24hr 04 50 53 22 75; place de l'Aiguille du Midi; adult/child return to Aiguille du Midi €41/33, Plan de l'Aiguille €24/19.20; 🕒8.30am-4.30pm) cable car links Chamonix with the Aiguille du Midi. Halfway Plan de l'Aiguille (2317m) is a terrific place to start hikes or paraglide. In summer you will need to obtain a boarding card (marked with the number of your departing *and* returning cable car) in addition to a ticket. Advance phone reservations incur a €2 booking fee. Ensure that you bring warm clothes as even in summer the temperature rarely rises above -10°C at the top.

From the Aiguille du Midi, between mid-May and mid-September you can continue for a further 30 minutes of mind-blowing scenery – think suspended glaciers and spurs, seracs and shimmering ice fields – in the smaller bubbles of the **Télécabine Panoramic Mont Blanc** (adult/child return from Chamonix €65/52; 🕒8.30am-3.45pm) to Pointe Helbronner (3466m) on the French-Italian border. From here another cable car descends to the Italian ski resort of Courmayeur.

Le Brévent

VIEWPOINT

The highest peak on the western side of the valley, Le Brévent (2525m) has tremendous views of the Mont Blanc massif, myriad hiking trails, ledges to paraglide from and summit restaurant Le Panoramic. Reach it with the **Télécabine du Brévent** (29 rte Henriette d'Angeville; adult/child return €24/19.50; 🕒8.50am-4.45pm), from the end of rue de la Mollard, to mid-station **Planpraz** (2000m), then continuing to the top.

Mer de Glace

GLACIER

France's largest glacier, the glistening 200m-deep Mer de Glace (Sea of Ice) snakes 7km through mighty rock spires and turrets; it was named by Englishman William Windham, the first foreigner to set eyes on the glacier in 1741. The glacier moves up to 90m a year, and has become a popular attraction thanks to the rack-and-pinion railway line opened in 1908.

Wrap up warm to experience the **Grotte de la Mer de Glace** (🕒late Dec-May & mid-Jun-Sep) ice cave, where frozen tunnels and ice sculptures change colour like mood rings.

A quaint red mountain train trundles up from **Gare du Montenvers** (35 place de la Mer de Glace; adult/child €24/19; 🕒10am-4.30pm)

in Chamonix to Montenvers (1913m), from where a cable car takes you down to the glacier and cave. The ticket covers the 20-minute journey, entry to the caves and the cable car.

The Mer de Glace can be reached on foot via the Grand Balcon Nord trail from

Plan de l'Aiguille. The two-hour uphill trail from Chamonix starts near the summer luge track. Traversing the crevassed glacier requires proper equipment and an experienced guide.

Chamonix



Musée Alpin

ALPINE MUSEUM

(av Michel Croz; adult/child €5.50/free; ☀2-7pm daily, plus 10am-noon during school holidays, closed Oct-mid-Dec) The town's illustrious alpine history zooms into focus at this museum; from the cliffhanging tale of crystal-hunter Jacques Balmat to the first ascent of Mont Blanc in 1786 and the advent of winter tourism.

Musée des Cristaux

CRYSTAL MUSEUM

(Esplanade St-Michel; adult/child €5.50/free; ☀2-7pm daily, plus 10am-noon during school holidays, closed Oct-mid-Dec) As well as cataloguing the region's rich rocks and minerals, this museum hosts intriguing temporary exhibitions such as the history of mountaineering and the impact of climate change on mountains.



Activities

Winter Activities

Maison de la Montagne

OUTDOOR ACTIVITIES

(190 place de l'Église; ☀8.30am-noon & 3-7pm) Get the **Mont Blanc** lowdown here, opposite the tourist office. Inside is the highly regarded **Compagnie des Guides de Chamonix** (☎04 50 53 00 88; www.chamonix

-guides.com); the **École de Ski Français** (ESF; ☎04 50 53 22 57; www.esf-chamonix.com); and the **Office de Haute Montagne** (OHM; ☎04 50 53 22 08; www.ohm-chamonix.com), which has information on trails, hiking conditions, weather forecasts and *refuges* (mountain huts), and topoguides and maps that are free to consult.

Skiing & Snowboarding

Chamonix skiing is the stuff of legend: glorious off-piste terrain, thrilling descents and unbeatable Mont Blanc views. It's so darn fantastic that skiers don't even mind that accessing the slopes involves lots of transport. Of Chamonix' nine main areas, **Le Tour**, **Les Planards** and **Les Chosalets** are best for beginners. For speed and challenge, it has to be **Brévent-Flégère**, above Chamonix, and **Les Grands Montets**, accessible from Argentière, 9km north of Chamonix. Boarders seeking big air zip across to the kickers and rails at **Les Grands Montets snowpark** and the natural half-pipe in **Le Tour**.

La Vallée Blanche

OFF-PISTE ROUTE

(per person/group of 4 incl guide €75/283) This mythical descent is *the* off-piste ride of a

Chamonix

📍 Top Sights

- Musée Alpin C3
- Téléphérique du l'Aiguille de Midi B6

📍 Sights

- 1 Musée des Cristaux A3

Activities, Courses & Tours

- 2 Association International des Guides du Mont Blanc B3
- Cham' Aventure (see 5)
- Compagnie des Guides de Chamonix (see 5)
- École de Ski Français (see 5)
- 3 Ice-Skating Rink C1
- 4 Les Ailes du Mont Blanc D1
- 5 Maison de la Montagne B3
- Office de Haute Montagne (see 5)
- 6 Summits B2

🛏 Sleeping

- 7 Auberge du Manoir C2
- 8 Chalet Hotel Hermitage D2
- 9 Club Alpin Français C3
- 10 Grand Hôtel des Alpes B4
- Hameau Albert 1er (see 7)
- 11 Hôtel El Paso B2

- 12 Hôtel Faucigny B3
- 13 Hotel L'Oustalet B5
- 14 Hôtel Richemond A4

🍴 Eating

- 15 Casa Valério B4
- 16 La Petite Kitchen C3
- 17 Le Bistrot B5
- 18 Le Chaudron B3
- 19 Le GouThé B2
- 20 Le Refuge Payot B2
- 21 Munchie B3
- 22 Tigre Tigre C3

🍷 Drinking

- 23 Bar'd Up B2
- 24 Bistrot des Sports B2
- 25 Chambre Neuf C3
- 26 Elevation 1904 C3
- 27 La Terrasse B3
- 28 Le Privilège B3
- 29 MBC D1
- 30 Monkey Bar A5

🎮 Entertainment

- Cantina Club (see 11)
- 31 Le Garage B5

lifetime. A veritable obstacle course of a route, La Vallée Blanche takes four to five hours, leading from Aiguille du Midi over the crevasse-riddled Mer de Glace glacier and back through forest to Chamonix, covering 2800m of jaw-dropping vertical. Because of the obvious risks, it must *only* be tackled with a guide (guides can take a maximum of eight people in a group – add an extra €16 per additional person to the price above). Snowboarders require an even better level than skiers. Snow coverage is generally best in February and March.

Haute Route

SKI TOUR

(per person incl guide & full board €880) *Ski de randonnée* (ski touring), at its best between March and May, is big in Chamonix and the range of tours seemingly endless. The backcountry king is this classic six-day route from Chamonix to Zermatt in Switzerland, stopping en route at *refuges*. To tackle it you need to be an experienced off-piste skier and superfit. Shorter two-day trips (about €320 per person) are suitable for advanced skiers but *ski de randonnée* novices.

Compagnie des Guides de Chamonix

SNOWSHOEING

(☎04 50 53 00 88; www.chamonix-guides.com; 190 place de l'Église; half-/full-day/twilight tour per person €32/47/67) A pair of *raquettes* (snowshoes) is all you need to go stomping off through virgin powder and glistering forests. The Compagnie des Guides arranges tours around the Mont Blanc range

from France to Switzerland and Italy, and romantic twilight tours through the forest with dinner. All prices include snowshoe hire and transport.

Huskydalen

MUSHING

(☎04 50 47 77 24; www.huskydalen.com, in French; mushing hr/half-day €55/110, dog walking 2hr €18) Ever fancied trying your hand at mushing? Huskydalen runs introductory courses from December to April. In summer try an old-fashioned version of dog-walking where the dog walks (read: drags) you from a harness.

Summer Activities

When the snow melts, hikers can take their pick of 350km of spectacular high-altitude trails, many reached by cable car. There's enough light to walk until at least 9pm in June and July.

Lac Blanc

WALK

From the top of **Les Praz l'Index Télépherique** (cable car; one-way/return €18/22) or **La Flégère** (€11/13), the line's midway point, gentle 1¼- to two-hour trails lead to 2352m Lac Blanc (literally 'White Lake'), a turquoise-coloured lake ensnared by mountains. Stargazers can overnight at the **Refuge du Lac Blanc** (☎04 50 53 49 14; dm incl half board €49; ☉mid-Jun-Sep), a wooden chalet favoured by photographers for its top-of-Europe Mont Blanc views.

Grand Balcon Sud

WALK

This easygoing trail skirts the western side of the valley, taking at around 2000m and commands a terrific view of Mont Blanc.

DON'T MISS

ADVENTURE KNOW-HOW

These guide companies have got it. So go, create your adventure:

Compagnie des Guides de Chamonix (☎04 50 53 00 88; www.chamonix-guides.com; 190 place de l'Église) Crème de la crème of mountain guides, founded in 1821. Guides for skiing, mountaineering, ice climbing, hiking, mountain biking and every other alpine pastime.

Association Internationale des Guides du Mont Blanc (☎04 50 53 27 05; 98 rue des Moulins) Chamonix-based international guides; extreme skiing, mountaineering, glacier trekking, ice and rock climbing, and paragliding.

Aventure en Tête (☎04 50 54 05 11; www.aventureenete.com; 620 rte du Plagnolet, Argentière) Ski touring and ski-alpinism expeditions; freeride and off-piste courses; mountaineering and climbing in summer. Argentière is 9km north of Chamonix.

Chamonix Experience (☎04 50 54 09 36; www.chamex.com; 141 rue Charlet Straton, Argentière) Courses in off-piste skiing, avalanche awareness, ice climbing and ski touring; in summer, rock and alpine climbing.



PISTES PASS

The **Mont Blanc Unlimited Pass** (1/6 days €50/240) is worth the investment for serious skiers, giving access to 400km of runs, including all ski areas in the Chamonix valley, the Aiguille du Midi cable car and Montanvers train, plus Courmayeur in Italy and Verbier in Switzerland. Cheaper but more limited in scope is the **Chamonix Le Pass** (1/6 days €40/200) with access to most of Chamonix' ski domains. View all options and buy passes online at www.compagniedumontblanc.com.

Reach it on foot from behind Le Brévent's *télécabine* station.

Grand Balcon Nord

WALK

Routes starting from the Plan de l'Aiguille include the challenging Grand Balcon Nord, which takes you to the dazzling Mer de Glace, from where you can walk or take the Montanvers train down to Chamonix.

Mountaineering & High-alpine Tours

MOUNTAIN TOURS

Mountaineers and rock climbers make the pilgrimage to Chamonix in summer, when local guide companies offer exhilarating climbs for those with the necessary skill, experience and stamina, such as five-day rock-climbing courses (€585) and the incomparable **Mont Blanc ascent** (€785). For hikers, the big draw is the classic 12-day **Tour du Mont Blanc** (€1240), taking in majestic glaciers and peaks in France, Italy and Switzerland. The price includes half board in *refuges*, picnics, lift tickets and luggage transport.

Cham' Adventure

WATER SPORTS

(☎04 50 53 55 70; www.cham-aventure.com; Maison de la Montagne, 190 place de l'Église) Thrill-seekers head here for canyoning (half/full day €65/99 per person), rafting (€37/130 for two hours/day) and hydrospeeding (€47/130 for two hours/day) on Chamonix' River Arve and the Dora Baltea in neighbouring Italy. Most activities are unsuitable for young children.

Cycling Trails

CYCLING

Lower-altitude trails like the Petit Balcon Sud (250m) from Argentière to Servoz are

perfect for biking. Most outdoor-activity specialists arrange guided mountain-biking expeditions. See p476.

Paragliding

PARAGLIDING

Come summer, the sky above Chamonix is dotted with paragliders wheeling down from the heights. Tandem flights from Planpraz (2000m) cost €100 per person (€220 from the Aiguille du Midi). Paragliding schools include **Summits** (☎04 50 53 50 14; www.summits.fr; 27 allée du Savoy) and **Les Ailes du Mont Blanc** (☎04 50 53 96 72; www.lesailesdumontblanc.com; 24 av de la Plage).



Festivals & Events

Marathon du Mont Blanc

MARATHON

(www.montblancmarathon.fr) The scenery is as breathtaking as the gruelling climb. Late June.

Fête des Guides

FESTIVAL

Two-day celebrations in mid-August welcoming new members to Chamonix' illustrious Compagnie des Guides with a dramatic *son et lumière*, fireworks, concerts and mountaineering displays.



Sleeping

Book ahead in winter, when hotel beds are at a premium. Many places close from mid-April to May and from November to mid-December. Room rates nosedive in the low season and summer; expect discounts of up to 50% on high-season prices.



Auberge du Manoir

CHALET €€

(☎04 50 53 10 77; <http://aubergedumanoir.com>, in French; 8 rte du Bouchet; s €94-108, d €104-150, q €165; ☎☎) Muriel, Frédéric and their friendly golden retriever lift moods at this beautifully converted farmhouse, ablaze with geraniums in summer. Auberge du Manoir ticks all the perfect alpine chalet boxes: pristine mountain views, pine-panelled rooms that are quaint but never cloying and an inviting bar where an open fire keeps things cosy. Breakfast is a treat, with fresh fruit, homemade tarts and DIY boiled eggs.

Hotel Slalom

BOUTIQUE HOTEL €€

(☎04 50 54 40 60; www.hotelslalom.net; 44 rue de Bellevue, Les Houches; r €158; ☎) Tracy, Heather and Justin are your affable hosts at this gorgeous chalet-style hotel, right at the foot of the slopes in Les Houches (8km west of central Chamonix). Rooms are the epitome of boutique chic – sleek, snowy white

ERIC FAVRET: MOUNTAIN GUIDE

Eric Favret, guide with Compagnie des Guides de Chamonix, was interviewed by Nicola Williams.

Ever since Mont Blanc, the highest peak in the Alps, was first climbed in 1786, Chamonix has attracted travellers worldwide. And there is something really special about it: not only does it sit amid extremely condensed mountaineering potential; it is also a perfectly balanced combination of pure landscape alignment and dramatic mountain views.

Aiguille du Midi

The Aiguille du Midi, with one of the highest cable cars in the world, cannot be missed. Beyond the summit ridge is a world of snow and ice offering some of the greatest intermediate terrain in the Alps.

Off-Piste Thrills

The Vallée Blanche has to be seen. But the Aiguille du Midi also has amazing off-piste runs, such as Envers du Plan, a slightly steeper and more advanced version of Vallée Blanche, offering dramatic views in the heart of the Mont Blanc range. There is also the less frequented run of the 'Virgin' or 'Black Needle'; a striking glacial run, offering different views and a close-up look at the Giant's seracs.

Best-Ever Mont Blanc View

No hesitation: the Traverse from Col des Montets to Lac Blanc. It's as popular as the Eiffel Tower for hikers in summer. I love swimming in mountain lakes, so I like to stop at Lac des Chéserys, just below, where it is quieter: What's better than a swim in pure mountain water, looking at Mont Blanc, the Grandes Jorasses and Aiguille Verte? This is what I call mountain landscape perfection!

and draped with Egyptian cotton linen. A bacon-and-eggs breakfast fires you up for a day's skiing.

Chalet Hotel Hermitage

CHALET €€

(04 50 53 13 87; www.hermitage-paccard.com; 63 chemin du Cé; s/d/tr/q €130/144/213/243; 🍷🍷) The trek from the slopes is worth it – Hermitage is a family-run treasure, with an open fire crackling in the bar, a kids' playroom, delicious home cooking and flowery gardens where you can survey Mont Blanc from your sunlounger. Decked out from top to toe in wood, rooms blend traditional alpine style with mod cons and afford mountain views.

Hotel L'Oustalet

FAMILY HOTEL €€

(04 50 55 54 99; www.hotel-oustalet.com; 330 rue du Lyret; d/q €140/180; 🍷🍷🍷) You'll pray for snow at this alpine chalet near Aiguille du Midi cable car, just so you can curl up by the fire with a *chocolat chaud* and unwind in the sauna and whirlpool. The rooms, including family ones, are snugly decorated in solid pine and open onto bal-

conies with Mont Blanc views. There's a pool in the garden for chilling out during the summertime.

Hôtel Faucigny

SMALL HOTEL €€

(04 50 53 01 17; www.hotelfaucigny-chamonix.com; 118 place de l'Église; s/d/tr/q €55/86/98/124; 🍷🍷) Jacqueline and Guy Écochard run this bijou hotel, one of the sweetest deals in town. Rooms are comfortable and quiet, and guests can relax by an open fire in winter and on the flower-clad terrace with Mont Blanc views in summer.

Grand Hôtel des Alpes

HISTORIC HOTEL €€€

(04 50 55 37 80; www.grandhoteldesalpes.com; 75 rue du Docteur Paccard; r €330-390, ste €580-750; 🍷🍷🍷🍷) This grand old dame goes down in the chronicles of Chamonix history as one of the resort's first (built in 1840) and finest. The wood-panelled rooms exude timeless elegance. What distinguishes this hotel, however, is its friendliness: in winter a scrumptious cake buffet greets skiers back from the slopes.

Les Deux Glaciers

CAMPGROUND €

(☎04 50 53 15 84; <http://les2glaciers.com>; 80 rte des Tissières; sites €14.50; ☼mid-Dec–mid-Nov; 📶) Oh, what a beautiful morning! Draw back your tent flap and be dazzled by Mont Blanc and glaciated peaks at this almost year-round campground in Les Bossons, 3km south of Chamonix. Take the train to Les Bossons, or the Chamonix bus to Tremplin-le-Mont.

Hameau Albert 1er

LUXURY HOTEL €€€

(☎04 50 53 05 09; www.hameaualbert.fr; 38 rte du Bouchet; d €210-540; 📶) Gathered around a hamlet of converted Savoyard farms and chalets, this resort oozes class with its spa, Mont Blanc-facing pool and Michelin-starred restaurant. The rooms harmoniously blend ultramodern and period furniture; those with jacuzzis and fireplaces are definite honeymoon material. Sadly, the service can be snooty.

Hôtel Richemond

SMALL HOTEL €€

(☎04 50 53 08 85; www.richemond.fr; 228 rue du Docteur Paccard; s/d/tr €65/104/133; 📶) This friendly, supercentral hotel has been run by the same family since 1914. OK, corridors have seen better days and the old-fashioned rooms are floral overload, but the Mont Blanc views and fabulous cast-iron bathtubs, a godsend for sore muscles, more than make up for it.

Hôtel El Paso

PARTY HOTEL €

(☎04 50 53 64 20; www.cantina.fr; 37 impasse des Rhododendrons; s/d/tr/q €49/64/75/90) What you'll get is a threadbare mattress and four scuffed walls reminiscent of good times – small sacrifices given that El Paso is

cheap, central and *the* place to party, dude. Tex-Mex feasts and DJs downstairs keep the place rocking, so invest in earplugs if sleeping is a priority.

Le Vert Hôtel

PARTY HOTEL €€

(☎04 50 53 13 58; www.verthotel.com; 964 rte des Gaillands; s/d/tr/q € 75/96/120/140) Self-proclaimed 'Chamonix' house of sports and creativity, this party house, 1km south of town, has no-frills rooms, some with microscopically small bathrooms. But what people really come for is the all-happening, ultrahip bar, a regular venue for top DJs and live music. Minimum three-night stay.

**Eating**

From postpiste burgers to Michelin-starred finery, Chamonix covers all the bases. Most restaurants open seven days a week in season but have reduced hours out of season. Call ahead to check.

**Les Vieilles Luges**

TRADITIONAL FRENCH €€

(☎06 84 42 37 00; www.lesvieillesluges.com; Les Houches; menus €20-35) Like a scene from a snow globe in winter, this childhood dream of a 250-year-old farmhouse can only be reached by slipping on skis or taking a scenic 20-minute hike from Maison Neuve chairlift. Under low wood beams, Julie and Claude spoil you with their home cooking – dishes such as *grand-mère's* beef bourguignon and creamy *farçon* (prepared with potatoes, prunes and bacon), all washed down with *vin chaud* (mulled wine) warmed over a wood fire. Magic.

DON'T MISS**CHILD'S PLAY**

There's plenty to amuse *les petits* (the little ones) around Chamonix.

Parc de Merlet (www.parcdemerlet.com; in French; admission €6; ☼10am-6pm Tue-Sun) is 5km north of Les Houches. Kids will enjoy getting close to free-roaming chamois, ibex and whistling marmots in this forested park. Or treat them to a fun-packed day on the trampolines, electric cars, forest-adventure obstacle courses and funfair rides at the **Parc de Loisirs de Chamonix** (www.chamonixparc.com; ☼10am-7.30pm Jul & Aug, hours vary Apr-Oct), near the chairlift in Les Planards. The summer **luge** (bob run; 1 descent/day pass €6/13) winds through trees at an electrifying speed.

The **ice-skating rink** (rte de la Patinoire; adult/child €5/4, skate hire €3.50; ☼2-5pm, closed low season) provides amusement when the weather packs up, as do activities at the adjacent **Centre Sportif Richard Bozon** (214 av de la Plage), a sports complex with indoor and outdoor **swimming pools** (adult/child €5.50/4; ☼10am-7pm Jul-Aug).

CHAMONIX CLIFFHANGERS

Cliffhanging is an understatement for many of the 18 *refuges* (mountain huts) in the Mont Blanc massif, poised perilously on the mountain edge or teetering precariously over a stomach-churning drop. The **Club Alpin Français** (☎04 50 53 16 03; www.clubalpin-chamonix.com; 136 av Michel Croz; ☎office for enquiries 4.30-7pm Mon-Tue & Thu-Sat) owns eight of the *refuges* and the rest are run privately.

Most *refuges* are staffed by a warden from around mid-June to mid-September and must be reserved in advance by telephone. Snow permitting, many are open – albeit without a warden – for several more months of the year. Expect to pay around €23 for a dorm bed and €40 to €50 for half board. Meals are simple, hearty and prepared by the hut-keeper.

La Petite Kitchen

MODERN EUROPEAN €

(80 place du Poilu; plat du jour €7-13, mains €14-19.50; ☎closed Tue) The little kitchen is just that: a handful of tables for the lucky few who get to indulge in its locally sourced feel-good food. Filling English breakfasts, steaks with homemade *frites* (hot chips) and the stickiest of toffee puddings will send you rolling happily out the door.

Le Bistrot

GASTRONOMIC €€€

(☎04 50 53 57 64; www.lebistrotchamonix.com, in French; 151 av de l'Aiguille du Midi; lunch menus €17, dinner menus €42-65; ☎) Sleek and monochromatic, this is a real foodie's place. Michelin-starred chef Mickey experiments with textures and seasonal flavours to create taste sensations like pan-seared Arctic char with chestnuts, and divine warm chocolate macaroon with raspberry and red pepper curls.

Le GouThé

TEA ROOM €

(95 rue des Moulins; menus €9; ☎9am-6.30pm Fri-Mon; ☎) Welcome to the sweetest of tea rooms. Philippe's smooth hot chocolates with pistachio and gingerbread infusions, startlingly bright macarons and crumbly homemade tarts like mirabelle plum with liquorice are just the sugar fix needed for the slopes. He's a dab hand with *galettes* (buckwheat crêpes), too.

Tigre Tigre

INDIAN €€

(☎04 50 55 33 42; 239 av Michel Croz; mains €11-17; ☎) This hip Indian restaurant is all the rage with its slinky bar for nibbling poppadums and sipping Cobra beers before the main event. Nice and spicy tikka, tandoori and biryani dishes get your tastebuds jumping like a Bollywood film set and service comes with – hurrah! – a smile.

Le Chaudron

SAVOYARD CUISINE €€

(☎04 50 53 57 64; 79 rue des Moulins; menus €20-23; ☎dinner) On a cold winter's day, this chic alpine chalet is guaranteed to give you that warm inner glow. Funky cowskin-clad benches are the backdrop for a feast of Savoyard fondues and lamb slow-cooked in red wine to melting perfection.

Munchie

FUSION €€

(☎04 50 53 45 41; www.munchie.eu; 87 rue des Moulins; mains €18-24; ☎dinner) The style of this trendy Swedish-run hangout is pan-Asian fusion: sashimi, sushi, tempura and Malaysian yellow curries are authentic and creatively presented. Sittings go faster than musical chairs, so it's worth a try even if you haven't booked.

Casa Valério

ITALIAN €€

(☎04 50 55 93 40; www.casavalerio.net; 90 rue du Lyret; pizza €8.50-13, mains €20-28; ☎noon-2am) Mona Lisa welcomes you with a wry smile at this buzzy Italian, famous for its delectable pasta, fresh fish and award-winning pizza margherita. Wine lovers are in their element. Sadly, staff with an attitude can let the show down somewhat.

Le Refuge Payot

FOOD MARKET €

(166 rue Joseph Vallot) Stock up on local goodies: cheese, smoked and air-dried meats, sausages, wine, honey etc.

**Drinking & Entertainment**

Chamonix nightlife rocks. In the centre, quaint old riverside rue des Moulins touts a line-up of drinking holes. Get the lowdown on the slope-side scene at www.lepetitca.nardchx.com.

Many of these après-ski joints serve food as well as booze.

Chambre Neuf

(272 av Michel Croz; ☎) Cover bands, raucous après-ski drinking and Swedish blondes dancing on the tables make Chambre Neuf one of Chamonix' liveliest party haunts. Conversations about epic off-pistes and monster jumps that are, like, totally mental, man, dominate at every table.

BAR

MBC

(www.mbcchx.com; 350 rte du Bouchet; ☎4pm-2am) This trendy microbrewery run by four Canadians is fab. Be it with their burgers, cheesecake of the week, live music or amazing locally brewed and named beers (Blonde de Chamonix, Stout des Drus, Blanche des Guides etc), MBC delivers.

MICROBREWERY

Monkey Bar

(81 place Edmond Desailoud; ☎1pm-2am; ☎) With a sign touting 'live sports and sexy bar staff', this is one very cheeky monkey. Slightly grungy, very cool, this party hot spot has live gigs and DJs several times a week. There's a mad rush to the bar at 4.45pm when pints are €1.50 for 15 minutes – get 'em in quick!

MUSIC BAR

Bistrot des Sports

(182 rue Joseph Vallot; ☎7am-2am) An age-old meeting place for muleteers, guides and other men of the mountain, this bolthole has kept a certain charm and authenticity. The street terrace is perfect for a mellow drink.

PUB

Elevation 1904

(259 av Michel Croz; ☎7pm-2am) Alpine paraphernalia lines the walls of this merry bet by the train station, with an all-day snack shack. The suntrap terrace is just right for relaxing over a cold one.

BAR

La Terrasse

(www.laterrassechamonix.com; 43 place Balmat; ☎4pm-2am; ☎) Race the clock for cheap drinks (5pm €5, 6pm €6 etc) and take position on the strategically placed terrace on Chamonix' main square. There's live music nightly.

MUSIC BAR

Cantina Club

(www.cantina.fr; 37 impasse des Rhododendrons; ☎7pm-3am) DJs spin everything from deep house to Afrobeat and hip hop at this pumping underground club. The street-level restaurant cooks up Tex-Mex food.

CLUB

Other happening haunts:

Office

(274 rue Charlet Stratton, Argentière; ☎3pm-2am; ☎) Sunday roast, English footy and a load of Brits, this is Argentière's party headquarters.

BAR

Bar'd Up

(123 rue des Moulins; ☎4pm-2am) Snowboarder fave with themed parties, big-screen sports and cheapish drinks.

BAR

Le Privilège

(52 rue des Moulins; ☎4pm-2am) Rustic-chic lounge with great cocktails and live music.

LOUNGE

Le Garage

(www.nightclublegarage.com; 200 av de l'Aiguille du Midi; ☎1am-4am) An electro-house club that opens for a short and sweet three hours of pumping beats every night.

CLUB

i Information

The tourist office has a list of doctors, dentists, pharmacists etc.

DON'T MISS**A LOFTY LUNCH**

Feast on fine cuisine and even finer mountain views at these high-altitude favourites.

Crazy as it sounds for a piste restaurant, you might have to book at **La Crèmerie du Glacier** (☎04 50 54 07 52; www.lacremiereduglacier.fr, in French; 766 chemin de la Glacière; mains €10-19; ☎closed Wed) to get a chance to bite into its world-famous *croûtes au fromage* (chunky slices of toasted bread topped with melted cheese). Ski to it with the red Pierre à Ric piste in Les Grands Montets.

Le 3842 (☎04 50 55 82 23; Aiguille du Midi; mains €12-21; ☎restaurant mid-Jun–mid-Sep, snack bar all year) offers stylish summit dining and drinking with knockout views at the top of the Aiguille du Midi in what claims to be Europe's highest café.

At **Le Panoramic** (☎04 50 53 44 11; menus from €15; ☎mid-Dec–Apr & late Jun–Sep), views of Mont Blanc are included in the menu of cheeses, cured meats and BBQ fare. For something a little more frugal, a *vin chaud* (hot mulled wine) at the terrace will do just fine. The restaurant is on the summit of Le Brévent (see p467).



GOING GREEN

Chamonix has long battled with air-pollution problems. In a bid to encourage locals and visitors to leave the car at home, the Chamonix valley offers free public transport on the buses in Chamonix and the train between Servoz (14km west) and Vallorcine (15.5km north). All you have to do is get a **carte d'hôte** from your hotel or campground and on you go for free! The card also offers reductions for a number of activities. Details are listed on the card leaflet.

Banque de Savoie (1 place Balmat) Has an exchange bureau.

Enjoy (128 rue des Moulins; internet per min/hr €0.10/5; ☎9am-7pm) Snack bar with seven PCs. Skype available.

Hospital (☎04 50 53 84 00; 509 rte des Pélerins) In Les Favrandes, 2km south of the centre.

Mojo's (21 place Balmat; internet per min/hr €0.10/5; ☎9am-8pm) Fun sandwich bar with six PCs.

PGHM (☎04 50 53 16 89; 69 rue de la Mollard) Mountain-rescue service for the entire Mont Blanc area.

Police station (☎04 50 53 00 55; 111 rue de la Mollard)

Post office (89 place Balmat)

Tourist office (☎04 50 53 00 24; www.chamonix.com; 85 place du Triangle de l'Amitié; ☎8.30am-7pm) Accommodation, weather and activity information.

Getting There & Away

Bus

From **Chamonix bus station** (www.sat-mont-blanc.com; place de la Gare), located next to the train station, two to three buses run daily to/from Geneva airport and bus station (one way/return €33/55, 1½ to two hours) and Courmayeur (one way/return €13/20, 45 minutes). Advanced booking is required for both. See the website for timetables and reservations.

Car & Motorcycle

Approaching Chamonix from Italy, you arrive via the 11.5km-long **Tunnel de Mont Blanc** (www.atmb.net; toll one way/return €35/44), which enters town in the southern suburb of Les Pélerins. From France, the A40 toll motorway – the Autoroute Blanche – hooks up with the Chamonix-bound N205 dual carriageway for the last leg.

Parking in town can be tricky although **Parking du Mont-Blanc** (place du Mont Blanc; 1st hr free, then per hr/day/week €2/8/50) is reliable. If you're lucky enough to get a spot, you can park for free on rue Helbronner and allée du Recteur Payot.

Car-hire companies include **Europcar** (www.europcar.com; 36 place de la Gare).

Train

The Mont Blanc Express narrow-gauge train trundles from St-Gervais–Le Fayet station, 23km west of Chamonix, to Martigny in Switzerland, stopping en route in Les Houches, Chamonix and Argentière. There are nine to 12 return trips between Chamonix and St-Gervais (€9.50, 40 minutes). Travelling between Servoz and Vallorcine is free if you have the *carte d'hôte*.

From St-Gervais–Le Fayet, there are trains to most major French cities.

Getting Around

BICYCLE You can hire a bike from **Le Grand Bi Cycles** (240 rte du Bouchet; per day €39; ☎10am-7pm Tue-Sat), which also gives advice on where to go.

BUS Local bus transport is handled by **Chamonix Bus** (www.chamonix-bus.com; 591 promenade Marie-Paradis). From mid-December to the end of April lines to the ski lifts and central car parks depart every 10 minutes or so between 7am and 7pm (town-centre shuttles 8.30am to 6.30pm). All buses are free with the *carte d'hôte* scheme, except the Chamo' Nuit night buses linking Chamonix with Argentière and Les Houches (last departures from Chamonix 11.30pm or midnight; €2).

TAXI For a taxi, call ☎04 50 53 13 94. Taxis pull up in front of the train station.

Megève & St-Gervais

Très chic Megève (population 4050, elevation 1113m) was developed in the 1920s for Baroness de Rothschild of the famous banking family, who found Switzerland's overcrowded St-Moritz frankly rather tiresome. Today the ski village looks almost too perfect to be true: horse-drawn sleighs, exquisitely arranged boutique windows and no fewer than eight Michelin-starred restaurants spill into its cobbled, medieval-style streets. In winter it attracts a moneyed crowd, but the scene is more laid-back in summer.

Sitting snug below Mont Blanc, 24km west of Chamonix, Megève's neighbour is refreshingly authentic St-Gervais-les-Bains

(population 5780, elevation 850m), better known as simply St-Gervais. Its postcard-perfect Savoyard village, centred on a baroque church and old-fashioned carousel, is linked to Chamonix by the legendary Mont Blanc Express.



Activities

A Mont Blanc massif backdrop makes for fabulously scenic skiing in Megève, where downhill is split into three separate areas: Mont d'Arbois-Princesse (linked to St-Gervais), Jaillet-Combloux and Rochebrune-Côte 2000. Skiing in both resorts is mostly for beginners and cruisy intermediates, and there are 445km of well-groomed pistes to play on. Lift passes are sold online at www.skiamegeve.com.

Panoramic hiking trails in the Bettex, Mont d'Arbois and Mont Joly areas head off from both villages. Some of the best mountain-biking terrain is marked between Val d'Arly, Mont Blanc and Beaufortain.

Maison de la Montagne OUTDOOR ACTIVITIES (176 rue de la Poste, Megève) Based here are Megève's **ESF** (www.megeve-ski.com; ☎9am-6.30pm Dec-early Apr, 9am-noon & 2-6pm rest of year) and **Compagnie des Guides** (www.guides-megeve.com, in French; ☎same as ESF), which organise activities such as off-piste skiing, ice climbing, rock climbing, paragliding, canyoning and mountain biking excursions.

Tramway du Mont Blanc FUNICULAR (rue de la Gare, St-Gervais; return to Bellevue/Nid d'Aigle €25/32; ☎9am-4.50pm) For spirit-soaring mountain views with zero effort, board France's highest train. Since 1913 it has laboured up to Bellevue (1800m) from St-Gervais-Le Fayet in winter and further up to the 2380m-high Nid d'Aigle (Eagle's Nest) in summer.



Sleeping & Eating

Tourist offices in Megève (☎04 50 21 29 52) and St-Gervais (☎04 50 47 76 08) run an **accommodation service**.

Au Coin du Feu BOUTIQUE HOTEL €€€ (☎04 50 21 04 94; www.coindufeu.com; 252 rte de Rochebrune, Megève; d €250-355; 🍷🍷) This enchanting boutique-chic chalet accentuates its oak-clad interiors with soft lighting and rich fabrics in Christmassy reds and greens. Nurse a *vin chaud* by the fire in the salon, treat yourself to mountain-herb-infused treatments in the spa,

and venture down to cellar restaurant **Le Saint Nicholas** (mains €22-25) for delicious Savoyard fare.

Le Gai Soleil CHALET €€ (☎04 50 21 00 70; www.le-gai-soleil.fr; 343 rue Crêt du Midi, Megève; d incl breakfast/half board €130/194; 🍷🍷🍷🍷) Beth makes you feel right at home in this inviting chalet, harbouring warm, spacious rooms, a jacuzzi and an inviting restaurant. The outdoor pool and sun deck afford sublime mountain views.

Les Dômes de Miage CAMPGROUND € (☎04 50 93 45 96; www.camping-mont-blanc.com; 197 rte des Contamines, St-Gervais; sites €21; ☎May-mid-Sep; 🏠) Mont Blanc is your wake-up call at this well-equipped campground, beautifully set in wooded hills. The first-rate facilities include a restaurant and playground.

La Chaumière FAMILY HOTEL € (☎04 50 93 60 10; www.lachaumierehotel.com; 222 av de Genève, St-Gervais-Le Fayet; s/d/tr/q €39/45/55/69; 🍷🍷🍷) This chalet-style hotel is a godsend for cash-strapped skiers, with bright, modern rooms sporting above-par perks like flatscreen TVs and balconies. Family rooms are available. There's free access to the minispa, gym and climbing wall.



Flocons de Sel GASTRONOMIC €€€ (☎04 50 21 49 99; www.floconsdesel.com; 1775 rte de Leutaz, Megève; lunch menus €35-70, dinner menus €135, cooking classes €60; ☎cooking classes 4-7pm Mon-Sat)

DON'T MISS

POTTER'S FANTASY

His name is Monsieur Baranger but he prefers to be called 'the potter behind the church' and that's precisely where you will find his rambling, poster-plastered workshop and gallery in St-Gervais. An eccentric and something of a local legend, M Baranger can often be seen at his wheel, where he throws pots, plates, ornaments and vases, which are then glazed in earthy shades of blue and cream. He's always smiling, he says, because he wakes up every day to do what he loves. And it shows. His workshop is open *quand vous voyez les lumières* (when the lights are on).

Emmanuel Renaut, who trained with Marc Veyrat and at Claridges, mans the stove at this two-Michelin-starred restaurant, housed in a stylishly converted farmhouse. He cooks and artistically presents whatever is fresh that day, be it lake fish or pigeon, rounding out with his signature *flocons de sucre* (sugar snowflakes) dessert. The insightful cooking classes focus on two to three recipes – from simple starters to petits fours.

Le Galeta

SAVOYARD CUISINE €€

(☎04 50 93 16 11; 150 impasse des Lupins, St-Gervais; mains €15-25; ☺dinner; ♿) Tucked behind the church, this rustic barn-style restaurant radiates alpine character and warmth. Sylvie and Serge serve up succulent meats grilled over a wood fire and tot up your (rather modest) bill on an antique till.

i Information

Megève tourist office (☎04 50 21 27 28; www.megeve.com; 70 rue de Monseigneur Conseil; ☺9am-7pm)

St-Gervais tourist office (☎04 50 47 76 08; www.st-gervais.net; 43 rue du Mont-Blanc; ☺9am-12.30pm & 2-8pm)

i Getting There & Away

BUS From Megève bus station, there are seven daily services to/from St-Gervais–Le Fayet and Sallanches train stations. In winter, airport shuttles run at least twice daily to/from Geneva airport (one way/return €44/75, 1½ hours) from Megève and St-Gervais.

TRAIN The closest train station to Megève is in Sallanches, 12km north; for information go to the SNCF information desk inside the bus station. St-Gervais is the main train station for Chamonix, linked to the latter by the Mont Blanc Express. Services include several day trains (€86, 5½ hours) and one overnight train (€93, 9½ hours) to Paris, plus frequent trains to Lyon (€32, 3½ hours), Annecy (€13.50, 1½ hours) and Geneva (€12, 1½ hours).

Les Portes du Soleil

Poetically dubbed ‘the Gates of the Sun’ (elevation 1000m to 2466m; www.portesdu-soleil.com), this gargantuan ski area – the world’s largest – is formed from a chain of 12 villages strung along the French–Swiss border.

The best known of the villages is **Morzine** (elevation 1000m), which retains some traditional alpine charm, especially

in summer when visits to alpine cheese dairies and traditional slate workshops kick in. Small, trend-conscious **Avoriaz** (elevation 1800m), a purpose-built ski resort a few kilometres up the valley atop a rock, appeals for its no-cars policy. Horse-drawn sleighs piled high with luggage romantically ferry new arrivals to and from the snowy village centre where wacky 1960s mimetic architecture gets away with an ‘avant-garde’ tag.

Arriving by road via Cluses you hit smaller **Les Gets** (elevation 1172m), a family favourite.

Activities

A mind-blowing 650km of downhill slopes and cross-country trails criss-cross Les Portes de Soleil, served by 202 ski lifts and covered by a single ski pass. Morzine is ideal beginner and intermediate terrain, with scenic tree runs for bad-weather days. The snow-sure slopes of Avoriaz offer more of a challenge. This is freestyle heaven, boarders say, with deep powder; several snow-parks to play in and a fantastic superpipe near the top of Prodains cable car.

Mountain bikers can tackle 380km of invigorating trails, such as the 100km-long circular Portes du Soleil tour.

Bureau des Guides

OUTDOOR ACTIVITIES

(☎04 50 75 96 65) For local know-how on summer activities – hiking, biking, climbing, canyoning and paragliding – and advice on mountain-bike hire and Morzine’s heart-stopping 3300m-long **bike descent** (free; ☺Jun-Sep) from the top of the Plénéry **cable car** (1/10 ascents €4.50/35).

Sleeping & Eating

Bear in mind that most places close in May, October and November. Advance bookings are essential in the high season.

TOP CHOICE Farmhouse

BOUTIQUE HOTEL €€

(☎04 50 79 08 26; www.thefarmhouse.fr; Le Mas de la Coutettaz, Morzine; d incl half board €169-257, dinner €40) Morzine’s oldest pile is this gorgeous 1771 farmhouse run by the charming Dorrien Ricardo. Five rooms (some with Victorian-style bathrooms) are in the main house, and a trio of cottages (including the old *mazot*, a miniature mountain chalet) sit in the lovely grounds. Dining – open to nonguests too – is a lavish affair around one huge banquet table.

Ferme de Montagne

BOUTIQUE HOTEL €€€

(☎04 50 75 36 79; www.fermedemontagne.com, Les Gets; half board per person per week €1500-2250) This glamourpuss of a spa-clad farmhouse has been tipped as one of Europe's hottest boutique ski hotels by glossy-mag critics. The price tag covers every imaginable luxury: personalised ski guides, afternoon tea with homemade cakes by a roaring fire, champagne in the hot tub surrounded by snowy peaks, you name it.

Fleur de Neige

CHALET €€

(☎04 50 79 01 23; www.chaletotelfleurdesneiges.com; Le Mas de la Coutettaz, Morzine; d incl half board €90; ☎☎) A cheery welcome and solid home cooking await at this family-run chalet, decked out in warm wood. The heated pool and sauna beckon after a day carving the slopes.

Camping Les Marmottes

CAMPGROUND €

(☎04 50 75 74 44; <http://campinglesmarmottes.com>; Essert-Romand; sites €17) This small, tree-shaded campground nestles in the mountains, 5km north of Morzine. It's open year-round, so those made of hardy stuff can even pitch a tent in the snow (brrrrr...).

La Table du Marché d'Avoriaz

BISTRO €€

(☎04 94 97 91 91; www.christophe-leroy.com; place des Dromonts, Avoriaz; menus €19.50-39) Avoriaz has become so hip that renowned French chef Christophe Leroy has opened a minimalist-chic bistro here, serving market-fresh French flavours like roast beef with shallots and *gratin dauphinois* (finely sliced potatoes oven-baked in cream and a pinch of nutmeg) to a discerning crowd.

**Information**

Avoriaz tourist office (☎04 50 74 02 11; www.avoriaz.com; place Centrale; ☎9am-noon & 2-6pm Mon-Fri) Can book self-catering chalets and studios.

Les Gets tourist office (☎04 50 75 80 80, accommodation service 04 50 75 80 51; www.lesgets.com; place de la Mairie; ☎9am-noon & 2-6pm Mon-Sat)

Morzine tourist office (☎04 50 79 11 57; www.morzine-avoriaz.com; place de la Crusaz; ☎9am-noon & 2-6pm Mon-Sat) Also has an **accommodation service** (☎04 50 79 11 57; www.resa-morzine.com).

**Getting There & Away**

Free shuttle buses serve the lifts of Télécabine Super Morzine, Télécabine du Pléney and Téléphérique Avoriaz.

**MULTIPASS MAGIC**

Les Portes du Soleil's hottest summer deal is the Multipass, which costs €1 per day for guests and €6 for day trippers. Available from mid-June to mid-September, the pass covers transport from cable cars and chairlifts to shuttle buses; activities including tennis courts, ice rinks and swimming pools; and entry to five cultural sites, from heritage museums to abbeys.

During the ski season, Morzine (one way/return €36/59), Avoriaz (€39/65) and Les Gets (€33/55) are linked by a regular bus service to Geneva airport, about 50km west. From Morzine there are frequent **SAT buses** (www.sat-montblanc.com) to Les Gets and Avoriaz. There are also buses from Morzine to its closest train stations: Thonon-les-Bains and Cluses (one way/return €11/22).

Thonon-les-Bains

POP 32,850 / ELEV 430M

Just across the water from Lausanne on the French side of Lake Geneva (Lac Léman), Thonon-les-Bains – a fashionable spa town during the belle époque – sits on a bluff above the lake. Winter is deathly dull, but its summer cruises and lakeside strolls appeal.

**Sights & Activities****Château de Ripaille**

CASTLE

(www.ripaille.fr, in French; 1hr guided tour €6; ☎1-5 tours daily Feb-Oct) This turreted castle, rebuilt in the 19th century on the site of its 15th-century ancestor, is 1km east of town along quai de Ripaille. It has vineyards, a garden for summer dining (mid-April to mid-September) and forested grounds to explore.

Funicular Railway

FUNICULAR

(one way/return €1/1.80; ☎8am-9pm) This nostalgic 230m-long funicular links the upper town with the marina.

Fontaine de la Versoie

FOUNTAIN

(Parc Thermal de Thonon) You can fill your bottle with Thonon mineral water for free at this mosaic-lined fountain.

CGN

LAKE CRUISES

(www.cgn.ch; ☎May-Oct) Regular services from the port in Thonon-les-Bains to destinations around the lake, including

ÉVIAN, ÉVIAN EVERYWHERE

Trot 9km east from Thonon along the lake and you hit the elegant belle époque spa town of **Évian-les-Bains**, of mineral-water fame. Discovered in 1790 and bottled since 1826, the water takes 15 years to trickle down through the Chablais Mountains, gathering minerals en route, before emerging at 11.4°C. A favourite country retreat of the dukes of Savoy, Évian was reinvented as a luxury spa resort in the 18th century when wallowing in tubs of mineral water was all the rage. You can wallow yourself in the thermal pools at **Les Thermes Évian** (www.lesthermesevian.com; place de la Libération; discovery day €55; ☀9am-6pm Mon-Sat).

Fill your bottle with Évian water for free at art nouveau spring **Buvette Cachat** (20 av des sources). For total immersion, call ahead to arrange a **tour** (☎04 50 84 86 54; admission free, transport €2; ☀Jun-Sep) of the Évian bottling plant, 5km out of town. The **tourist office** (www.eviantourism.com; place d'Allinges) can also help.

Geneva (one way/return €28/47), Évian-les-Bains (€12/21) and Yvoire (€14/24). See the website for an up-to-date timetable and other themed cruises.



Sleeping

La Ferme du Château

B&B €€

(☎06 25 06 44 93; www.lafermeduchateau.com, in French; Hameau de Maigny, Drailant; d €85; ☎) Well worth the 10km drive south of town, this renovated 18th-century Savoyard farmhouse is run by dream duo Sophie and Didier. Tranquillity reigns in the country-style rooms clad in wood and stone, the vine-clad garden and by the outdoor pool.

Hôtel à l'Ombre des Marronniers

HOTEL €

(☎04 50 71 26 18; www.hotellesmarronniers.com, in French; 17 place de Crête; d €50-62; ☎☎) Sitting in flowery gardens, this chalet-style hotel is the pick of the in-town options, with modest, well-kept rooms and an outdoor pool.



Information

Lakeside tourist office (☀10am-12.30pm & 2-6.30pm Jul & Aug) A chalet where you can also buy boat tickets with **CGN** (www.cgn.ch).

Tourist office (☎04 50 71 55 55; www.thononlesbains.com; Château de Sonnaz, 2 rue Michaud; ☀9am-12.15pm & 1.45-6.30pm Mon-Fri, from 10am Sat) In the upper town.



Getting There & Away

BUS From Thonon bus station (place des Arts), **SAT** (www.sat-leman.com) runs regular buses to/from Évian-les-Bains (€1.50, 20 minutes) and into the Chablais Mountains, including to Morzine (€11, one hour).

TRAIN The train station (place de la Gare) is southwest of place des Arts, the main square. Trains run to/from Geneva (€7, 50 minutes) direct or via Annemasse (€6, 30 minutes).

Yvoire

POP 830 / ELEV 372M

A real sleeping beauty of a medieval village, Yvoire, 16km west of Thonon on the shores of Lake Geneva, makes for a great day trip. The village is a riot of turrets and towers, cob houses and geranium-lined streets. Familiarise yourself with its 700-year history on a 1½-hour **guided tour** (tour €5.50; ☀10.45am Tue & Thu, 4.45pm Wed & Fri Jul-Aug).

Slumbering in the shadow of a 14th-century castle and enclosed by walls, the **Jardin des Cinq Sens** (Garden of Five Senses; www.jardin5sens.net; rue du Lac; adult/child €10/5.50; ☀10am-7pm) appeals to the senses through touch, sound (gurgling water), scent (fragrant gardens) and taste (edible plants).

The **tourist office** (☎04 50 72 80 21; www.yvoiretourism.com; place de la Mairie; ☀9.30am-12.30pm & 1.30-5pm Mon-Sat, noon-4pm Sun) can advise on accommodation.

Annecy

POP 53,000 / ELEV 447M

Annecy paints the prettiest of pictures. Carressed by sapphire Lac d'Annecy, ringed by lushly wooded mountains and spiralling around a medieval old town, it makes visitors – all two million of them a year – stop

in wonder and reach for their cameras on every glorious corner.

Come summer, you can sidestep the masses exploring quiet backstreets, strolling flower-strewn promenades and taking a tingly dip in that masterpiece of a lake: one of the world's purest, fed only by rainwater, spring water and mountain streams.



Sights



Palais de l'Isle

MUSEUM

(3 passage de l'île; adult/child €3.60/1.30; 10.30am-6pm) Sitting on a triangular islet in the Canal du Thiou, the whimsically turreted, 12th-century Palais de l'Isle has been a lordly residence, courthouse, mint and prison (lucky inmates!) over the centuries.

Annecy



Annecy

Top Sights

Château d'Annecy.....	B3
Palais de l'Isle.....	C2

Activities, Courses & Tours

1 Annecy Plongée.....	D3
2 Compagnie des Bateaux.....	C3
3 Lake Boat Tours Departure Point.....	C3
4 Pedal Boat Hire.....	D2
5 Pedal Boat Hire.....	D2
6 Pedal Boat Hire.....	D3
7 Pedal Boat Hire.....	D2
8 Roll'n Cy.....	C2
9 Roull'ma Poule.....	C3

Sleeping

10 Auberge du Lyonnais.....	B2
11 Hôtel Alexandra.....	B1

12 Hôtel des Alpes.....	B1
13 Hôtel du Château.....	B3
14 Hôtel du Palais de l'Isle.....	C2
15 Le Pré Carré.....	B1

Eating

16 Au Fidèle Berger.....	B1
17 Contresens.....	B1
18 Food Market.....	B2
19 La Ciboulette.....	B1
20 La Cuisine des Amis.....	C1
21 L'Estaminet.....	B2
22 L'Étage.....	B2
23 Nature & Saveur.....	A2

Drinking

24 Finn Kelly's.....	C3
25 River's Café.....	A3

Today Annecy's most visible landmark hosts lake-history displays.

Vieille Ville & Lakefront HISTORIC QUARTER
It's a pleasure simply to wander aimlessly around Annecy's medieval old town, a photogenic jumble of narrow streets, turquoise canals and colonnaded passageways. Continue down to the tree-fringed lakefront and the flowery **Jardins de l'Europe**, linked to the popular picnic spot **Champ de Mars** by the poetic iron arch of the **Pont des Amours** (Lovers' Bridge).

Château d'Annecy CASTLE
(rampe du Château; adult/child €4.90/2.30; ☉10.30am-6pm) Rising dramatically above the old town, this perkily turreted castle was once home to the Counts of Geneva. The oldest part is the 12th-century Tour de la Reine (Queen's Tower). Its museum takes a romp through traditional Savoyard art, crafts and alpine natural history.



Activities

Sunbathing & Swimming

When the sun's out, the beaches fringing Annecy's lakefront beckon.



FREE Plage d'Annecy-le-Vieux BEACH
(☉Jul & Aug) If you feel like diving

straight into those crystal-clear waters, head to this public beach, 1km east of Champ de Mars.

Plage Impérial BEACH
(admission €3.50; ☉Jul & Aug) Closer to town, this privately run beach sits beneath the elegant pre-WWI Impérial Palace.



FREE Plage des Marquisats BEACH
(☉Jul & Aug) This sand and shingle

beach is 1km south of town along rue des Marquisats.

Piscine des Marquisats SWIMMING POOLS
(29 rue des Marquisats; adult/child €4/3; ☉10am-7pm May-Aug) Right next door to the beach is this trio of outdoor swimming pools.

Walking

You can amble along the lakefront from the Jardins de l'Europe to the Stade Nautique des Marquisats and beyond. Another scenic stroll begins at Champ de Mars and meanders eastwards towards Annecy-le-Vieux. **Forêt du Crêt du Maure**, south of Annecy, has myriad walking trails, as do the wildlife-rich wetlands of **Bout du Lac**, 20km from Annecy on the lake's southern

tip, and **Roc de Chère** nature reserve, 10km away on the eastern shore.

The tourist office stocks guides and maps, including IGN's *Lac d'Annecy* and *Walks and Treks Lake of Annecy*, listing 15 itineraries in the area (€6.50).

Cycling & Blading

Biking and blading are big, with 46km of cycling tracks encircling the lake. The tourist office and rental outlets have free maps.

Roll'n Cy BLADING
(www.roll-n-cy.org; ☉8pm Fri Mar-mid-Dec) Get your skates on for the jaunts organised by this local rollerblading club. The meeting point is in front of the Mairie (Town Hall) on rue de l'Hôtel de Ville.

Roul' ma Poule CYCLING, BLADING
(www.annecy-location-velo.com; 4 rue des Marquisats; ☉9.30am-12.30pm & 2-7pm Wed-Mon) Rents per half-/full day rollerblades (€12/18), bikes (€12/18), tandems (€22/33) and scooters (€10/15). Can recommend day trips in the area.

Station Roller CYCLING, BLADING
(www.roller-golf-annecy.com, in French; 2 av du Petit Port; ☉9am-10pm) Bike, blade and kayak outlet near the Plage Impérial at the start of the lakeside cycling path.

Water Sports

The most relaxed way to see the lake is from the water. From late March to October, pedal boats and motorboats can be hired along the quays of the Canal du Thiou and Canal du Vassé. In summer check out the following outlets:

Canoë-Kayak Club d'Annecy KAYAKING
(www.kayak-annecy.com, in French; 33 rue des Marquisats; per hr €7-12) Kayak and canoe hire.

Société des Régates à Voile d'Annecy SAILING
(www.srva.info, in French; 31 rue des Marquisats) Rents sailing boats from €30 for two hours.

Annecy Plongée SAILING
(www.annecyplongee.com; 6 rue des Marquisats) Sells and rents diving gear and arranges two-hour baptism dives (€45).

Adventure Sports

The tourist office has details on a whole host of companies that arrange adrenalin-driven activities on and around Lake Annecy. One of the most central is **Takamaka** (www.takamaka.fr; 23 faubourg Ste Claire). In-

troductory course prices start from €85 for tandem paragliding, €33 for waterskiing or wakeboarding, €39 for climbing or freeriding, €49 for canyoning and €55 for bungee jumping.

Tours

Town tours

WALKING TOUR

(per person €6; ☉3pm Thu & Sat) The tourist office organises guided tours of the old town; they are in French but some guides speak a little English. If you would prefer to go it alone, pick up the free *Annecy Town Walks* leaflet.

Compagnie des Bateaux

CRUISES

(www.annecy-croisieres.com; 2 place aux Bois; 1/2hr lake cruise €12.50/16; ☉mid-Mar–Oct) Runs cruises departing from quai Bayreuth. Tickets are sold 15 minutes before departure. From May to September boats also sail across the lake to Menthon-St-Bernard (€5.50), Talloires (€6.50) and other villages.



Festivals & Events

Annecy celebrates the flamboyant **Venetian carnival** in February, the **Fête du Lac** with fireworks over the lake in August, and October's **Le Retour des Alpes**, when the cows come home from the alpine pastures, wreathed in flowers and bells. Street performers wow evening crowds at **Les Noctibules** in July.



Sleeping

You'll need to book months ahead if you're planning to visit Annecy in July or August when rooms are gold-dust rare. The tourist office has details of campgrounds and *chambres d'hôtes* (B&Bs) scattered around the lake.

Hôtel Alexandra

FAMILY HOTEL €

(☎04 50 52 84 33; www.hotelannecy-alexandra.fr; 19 rue Vaugelas; s/d/tr/q €48/59/70/89; ☉☉) Nice surprise: Annecy's most charming hotel is also one of its most affordable. The welcome is five-star, rooms are fresh and spotless – a few extra euros get you a balcony and canal view – and breakfast is a generous spread with fresh pastries.

Le Pré Carré

BOUTIQUE HOTEL €€€

(☎04 50 52 14 14; www.hotel-annecy.net; 27 rue Sommeiller; s/d €172/202; ☉☉☉) One of Annecy's chicest hotels, Le Pré Carré keeps things contemporary with Zen colours in rooms with balconies or terraces, a jacuzzi and a business corner. The staff know

Annecy inside out so you're in very good hands.

Hôtel du Château

SMALL HOTEL €

(☎04 50 45 27 66; www.annecy-hotel.com; 16 rampe du Château; s/d/tr/q €49/68/75/85; ☉☉) Nestled at the foot of the castle, this hotel's trump card is its sun-drenched, panoramic breakfast terrace. Rooms are small but sweet with their pine furniture and pastel tones.

Hôtel des Alpes

TRADITIONAL HOTEL €€

(☎04 50 45 04 56; www.hotelannecy.com; 12 rue de la Poste; s/d/tr €67/77/92; ☉) This bubblegum-pink hotel in Annecy's centre has well-lit rooms with squeaky-clean bathrooms. It's reasonably quiet despite being on a busy street.

Hôtel du Palais de L'Isle

HISTORIC HOTEL €€

(☎04 50 45 86 87; www.hoteldupalaisdelisle.com; 13 rue Perrière; s/d €76/108; ☉☉) Guests slumber in the heart of old-town action at this 18th-century haunt, where the crisp contemporary decor is soothing after the bustle outside. Rooms sport assorted views of the Palais, the castle or the old town's sea of roofs.

Auberge du Lyonnais

TRADITIONAL HOTEL €

(☎04 50 51 26 10; www.auberge-du-lyonnais.com; 9 rue de la République; s €45-60, d €50-75, menus €25-30; ☉☉) This canalside contender in the old town has light and comfy (if small) rooms with pine furnishings. The restaurant is renowned for its seafood; the €25 three-course *menu* is worth every cent.

Camping les Rives du Lac

CAMPGROUND €

(☎04 50 52 40 14; www.lesrivesdulac-annecy.com; 331 chemin des Communaux; sites €21; ☉mid-Apr–mid-Oct; ☉) Pitch your tent near the lakefront at this shady campground, 5km south of town in Sévrier. A cycling track runs into central Annecy from here.

Auberge de Jeunesse

HOSTEL €

(☎04 50 45 33 19; www.fuaj.org, in French; 4 rte du Semnoz; dm incl breakfast & sheets €19.50; ☉mid-Jan–Nov; ☉) Annecy's smart wood-clad hostel has great facilities (bar, kitchen, barbecue, TV room) and chipper staff. Dorms have en-suite showers. It's a 10-minute walk south of the centre.



Eating

The quays along Canal du Thiou in the Vieille Ville are jam-packed with touristy cafés and pizzerias. Crêpes, kebabs, classic

French cuisine – you'll find it all along pedestrianised rue Carnot, rue de L'Isle and rue Faubourg Ste-Claire.



Chalet la Pricaz

TRADITIONAL FRENCH €€

(☎04 50 60 72 61; Col de la Forclaz, mains €18-30; ☺closed Wed; ☞) On its fairy-tale perch above Lake Annecy, this is prime romantic sunset material. Only locally sourced organic ingredients feature on the menu. Tangy *tartiflettes* (Reblochon cheese with potatoes, crème fraîche, onions and diced bacon) and farm-fresh charcuterie go brilliantly with the first-rate selection of Savoyard wines. The tucked-away restaurant is off the D42, 13km south of Annecy.

L'Estaminet

BISTRO €€

(☎04 50 45 88 83; 8 rue Ste-Claire; mains €15-22; ☺closed Sun dinner & Mon) With its dark wood and intriguing knick-knacks, this incredibly cosy *estaminet* (Flemish eatery) whisks you to the backstreets of Brussels. Draught Belgian beers pair well with *carbonnade flamande* (rich Flemish beef stew) and *moules* (mussels) with unusual additions like pastis and curry.

La Cuisine des Amis

BISTRO €€

(☎04 50 10 10 80; 9 rue du Pâquier; mains €16.50-25) Walking into this bistro is, at times, like gatecrashing a private party. Here locals and all-comers are treated like one big jolly *famille*. Pull up a chair, *prendre un verre* (have a drink), dine well on regional fare, pat the dog and, finally, see if your snapshot ends up on the wall of merry *amis* (friends).

La Ciboulette

MODERN FRENCH €€

(☎04 50 45 74 57; www.laciboulette-annecy.com; cour du Pré Carré, 10 rue Vaugelas; menus €31-46; ☺Tue-Sat) Such class! Crisp white linen and gold-kissed walls set the scene at this surprisingly affordable Michelin-starred place, where chef Georges Paccard cooks fresh seasonal specialities, such as slow-roasted Anjou pigeon with Midi asparagus. Reservations are essential.

Contresens

FUSION €€

(☎04 50 51 22 10; 10 rue de la Poste; mains €15; ☺Tue-Sat; ☞) The menu reads like a mathematical formula but it soon becomes clear: starters are A, mains B, sides C and desserts D. The food is as experimental as the menu – sun-dried tomato, Beaufort cheese and rocket salad burger, mussel ravioli, 'de-

constructed' Snickers – and totally divine. Kid nirvana.

L'Étage

TRADITIONAL FRENCH €€

(☎04 50 51 03 28; 13 rue du Pâquier; mains €14-22, 3-course menus €18) Cheese, glorious cheese... *Fromage* is given pride of place in spot-on fondues and *raclette* (a combination of melting cheese, boiled potatoes, charcuterie and baby gherkins) at L'Étage, where a backdrop of mellow music and cheerful staff keep the ambience relaxed.

Au Fidèle Berger

TEAROOM €

(2 rue Royale; cakes & pastries €2-4; ☺9.15am-7pm Tue-Sat) Bag a spot on the terrace of this old-English-style tearoom to watch the street entertainers and indulge your sweet tooth on decadent cakes, macaroons and homemade ice creams.



Nature & Saveur

ORGANIC €€

(☎04 50 45 82 29; place des Cordeliers; lunch menus with/without wine €42/32; ☺lunch Tue-Sat) Laurence Salomon's 100% organic restaurant attracts a boho-chic clientele. Inspired by the seasons, the menu uses wholesome ingredients from local farms, from obscure legumes to locally reared meat.

Food Market

MARKET €

(Vieille Ville; ☺7am-1am Sun, Tue & Fri) The old-town market is great for picnic fixings.



Drinking

Annecy needs its beauty sleep, so nights are more about people-watching over relaxed drinks by the canalside than raving it up. For a livelier vibe try these:

Finn Kelly's

PUB

(10 faubourg des Annonciades; ☺4.30pm-3am; ☞) Has live sports, darts and billiards, and regular DJ nights and gigs at weekends.

River's Café

BAR

(2 rue de la Gare; ☺11am-3am) A young and hip crowd linger over expertly mixed caipirinhas and house beats at this voguish lounge bar.



Information

Hospital (☎04 50 88 33 33; 1 av de Trésum)

Magic Phone (3 rue de l'Industrie; internet per 15min/1hr €1/3; ☺10am-8pm) High-speed internet access.

Planète Telecom (4 rue Jean Jaurès; internet per hr €3; ☺9.30am-8pm) Internet access and discount calls.

DON'T MISS

LAKESIDE LEGENDS

Dining and staying *à la lakeside* legend requires a healthy appetite and bank balance. Book at least a week ahead to snag a table.

At the Michelin-starred **La Nouvelle Maison de Marc Veyrat** (☎04 50 09 97 49; www.marcveyrat.fr; 13 vieille rte des Pensières, Veyrier-du-Lac; d €200-300, menus €92; ☉Thu-Sun late May-Sep) French celebrity chef Marc Veyrat has handed over his stove, culinary flamboyance and signature use of wild herbs to his capable successor Yoann Conte. In Veyrier-du-Lac, 5km southeast of Annecy, the baby-blue house by the lake also has a handful of wonderful rooms.

Whether alfresco on Lake Annecy's shores in summer or in the classically elegant salon in winter, dining at **Auberge du Père Bise** (☎04 50 60 72 01; www.perebise.com; 303 rte du Port, Talloires; d €270-300, menus €76-175; ☉Thu-Mon) is never less than extraordinary. Female chef Sophie Bise allows the clean flavours and freshness of local produce to shine in signatures like Annecy lake fish with duck foie gras and tart Granny Smith apple. The restaurant is 12km south of Annecy in Talloires.

Police station (☎04 50 52 32 00; 15 rue des Marquisats)

Post office (4bis rue des Glières)

Tourist office (☎04 50 45 00 33; www.lac-annecy.com; 1 rue Jean Jaurès, Centre Bonlieu; ☉9am-6.30pm Mon-Sat, 10am-1pm Sun) Has a selection of free maps and brochures, and can help with last-minute hotel bookings.

i Getting There & Away

BUS From the **bus station** (rue de l'Industrie), adjoining the train station, the **Billetterie Cro-lard** (www.voyages-crolard.com) sells tickets for roughly hourly buses to lakeside destinations including Menthon-St-Bernard (€2.40, 20 minutes), Veyrier-du-Lac (€2.10, 15 minutes) and Talloires (€2.80, 25 minutes); and for local ski resorts La Clusaz and Le Grand Bornand (one way/return €8.50/16.50, 50 and 60 minutes respectively). It also runs four to five buses daily to/from Lyon St-Exupéry airport (one way/return €33/50, 2¼ hours).

Next door, **Autocars Frossard** (www.frossard.eu) sells tickets for Geneva (€10.50, 1¼ hours, 16 daily), Thonon-les-Bains (€16.50, two hours, twice daily), Évian-les-Bains (€18.50, 2½ hours, twice daily) and Chambéry (€9.20, 1¼ hours).

TRAIN From Annecy's **train station** (place de la Gare), there are frequent trains to/from Aix-les-Bains (€7, 30 minutes), Chambéry (€9, 45 minutes), St-Gervais (€13.50, 1½ hours), Lyon (€23, 2¼ hours) and Paris Gare de Lyon (€75, four hours).

i Getting Around

BUS Get info on local buses at **Espace SIBRA** (www.sibra.fr; 21 rue de la Gare), opposite the bus station. Buses run from 6am to 8.30pm

and a single ticket/day pass/*carte* of 10 costs €1.10/3/9.50.

BICYCLE Bikes can be hired from **Vélonéc** (place de la Gare), situated at the train station, for €15 per day. People with a valid bus or train ticket only pay €5 per day.

Around Annecy

On warm summer days the villages of **Sévrier**, 5km south on Lake Annecy's western shore, and **Menthon-St-Bernard**, 7km south on the lake's eastern shore, make good day trips. South of Menthon, **Talloires** is the most exclusive lakeside spot. All have wonderful beaches.

In winter, ski-keen Annéciens head for the cross-country slopes of **Semnoz** (elevation 1700m; www.semnoz.fr, in French), 18km south; or downhill stations **La Clusaz** (elevation 1100m; www.laclusaz.com), 32km east, and **Le Grand Bornand** (elevation 1000m; www.legrandbornand.com), 34km northeast.

Chambéry

POP 59,100 / ELEV 270M

Chambéry has a lot going for it: strategic location at the crossroads of the main alpine valleys, scenic setting near Lac du Bourget and two regional parks, and a rich heritage of French, Italian and Savoy rules. While the city receives just a trickle of visitors, those who do venture here are rewarded with crowd-free museums and pleasant strolls in its arcaded streets.

KING OF 12 CASTLES

If you love nothing better than a castle, you'll love following in the footsteps of gallant dukes and feudal lords on the **Route des Ducs de Savoie** (Road of the Dukes of Savoy; www.chateaux-france.com/route-savoie). The route weaves through pristine alpine landscapes from Thonon-les-Bains to Avressieux, 30km west of Chambéry, and ticks off 12 castles, abbeys and historic sites including Château de Ripaille, Château d'Annecy and Château des Ducs de Savoie.

For acting out fairy-tale fantasies, there's little that beats the silver-turreted, high-on-a-hillside **Château de Menthon-St-Bernard** (www.chateau-de-menthon.com; Menthon-St-Bernard; guided tour adult/child €7.50/4.50; ☉2-6pm Fri-Sun May-Sep), the birthplace of St Bernard (1008). Word has it that the château inspired Walt Disney's *Sleeping Beauty* castle. Tours of the medieval interior, taking in tapestry-adorned salons and a magnificent library, are intriguing, but it's the sparkling Lake Annecy panorama that leaves visitors spellbound.

The city was Savoy's capital from the 13th century until 1563 when the dukes of Savoy shifted their capital to Turin in Italy. The 11th-century castle, which once served as the seat of power for the House of Savoy, now houses the administration for the Savoie *département*.

Sights

For up-to-date information on exhibitions, visit <http://musees.chambery.fr> (in French). Admission to the city's museums is free on the first Sunday of the month.

Château des Ducs de Savoie CASTLE
(Castle of the Dukes of Savoy; place du Château; adult/child €2.50/free; ☉tours 2.30pm Tue-Sun) Chambéry's trophy sight is this forbidding medieval castle, once home to the counts and dukes of Savoy. Guided tours leave from the **Accueil des Guides** office, opposite the château, and cover an exhibition tracing Savoy's rich history and the Tour Trésorerie (Treasury Tower). The adjoining **Ste-Chapelle** was built in the 15th century to house the Shroud of Turin and is famous for its 70-bell Grand Carillon, Europe's largest bell chamber. The chapel was closed for renovation at the time of writing and is expected to reopen in 2011.

Les Charmettes

HISTORIC HOME

(890 chemin des Charmettes; admission free; ☉10am-noon & 2-6pm Wed-Mon) Genevan philosopher, composer and writer Jean-Jacques Rousseau, a key figure of the Enlightenment and French Revolution, lived with his lover, Baronne Louise Éléonore de Warens, at this charming late-17th-century house from 1736 to 1742. Discover Rous-

seau's passion for botany by taking a stroll in the landscaped garden full of herbs, flowers and vines. Les Charmettes is 1.5km southeast of town.

Fontaine des Éléphants

FOUNTAIN

(place des Éléphants) With its four intricately carved elephants, this fountain could be the model for an Indian postage stamp. It was sculpted in 1838 in honour of Général de Boigne (1751-1830), who made his fortune in the East Indies. When he returned home he bestowed some of his wealth on the town and was honoured posthumously with this monument. The genteel arcaded street that leads from the fountain to Château des Ducs de Savoie is another of his projects.

Cathédrale Métropole St-François de Sales

CATHEDRAL

(place de la Métropole; ☉8am-noon & 2-6.30pm) Built as a Franciscan chapel in the 15th century, Chambéry's cathedral hides unexpected treasures, including Europe's largest collection (some 6,000 sq m) of *trompe l'œil* painting, by artists Sevesi and Vicario, and a 35m-long maze dating from the mid-19th century.

Musée Savoisien

MUSEUM

(sq de Lannoy de Bissy; adult/child €3/free; ☉10am-noon & 2-6pm Wed-Mon) Housed in a Franciscan monastery and linked to the cathedral by cloisters, this museum showcases archaeological finds including a gallery of 13th-century wall paintings. The 2nd floor stages temporary exhibitions concentrating on Savoyard mountain life.

FREE Musée des Beaux-Arts ART GALLERY
(place du Palais de Justice; ☉10am-noon & 2-6pm Wed-Mon) Displays a small collection of 14th- to 18th-century Italian works. The gallery was undergoing renovation at the time of writing and is expected to reopen in 2011.

Sleeping

Chambéry's *chambres d'hôte* and self-catering studios are far more appealing than its nondescript chain hotels. **Gîtes de France** (☎04 79 33 22 56; www.gites-de-france-savoie.com; 24 bd de la Colonne) takes bookings. The nearest hostel is in Aix-les-Bains.

TOP CHOICE La Ferme du Petit Bonheur FARMSTAY €€
(☎04 79 85 26 17; www.fermedupetitbonheur.fr; 538 chemin Jean-Jacques; s/d/tr incl breakfast €80/90/110; ♿) *Bonheur* (happiness) is indeed yours if you stay with Eric (a musician) and Chantal (a painter) at their vine-clad farmhouse in the hills. Their exquisite taste shows in five countryfied rooms and personal touches like homemade croissants for breakfast. In summer there is a fragrant garden for enjoying views of the Bauges massif, while in winter you can snuggle by the wood-burning stove in the salon. La Ferme is a 15-minute walk or two-minute drive south of town; follow the signs for Les Charmettes.

Château de Candie HISTORIC HOTEL €€€
(☎04 79 96 63 00; www.chateaucandie.com; rue du Bois de Candie, Chambéry-le-Vieux; r €160-210; @☎☎) Landscaped grounds where ornate fountains trickle, old-world elegance in rooms with period furnishings, a swimming pool with dreamy mountain views and a Michelin-starred restaurant – this sublime 14th-century castle is a taste of the high life for mere mortals. To reach the château by car, take exit 15 on the N201 to Chambéry-le-Vieux.

Les Pervenches FAMILY HOTEL €€
(☎04 79 33 34 26; 600 chemin des Charmettes; r €65-85; ♿♿) In a quiet hamlet just 1km from the centre and 200m from Les Charmettes, Les Pervenches has nine cosy rooms with bucolic views of the hills. The restaurant, **Le Clos Normand** (menus €19-32), serves plenty of cheesy goodies but from a different part of France this time (the owners' native Normandy).

Art Hôtel HOTEL €
(☎04 79 62 37 26; www.arthotel-chambery.com; 154 rue Sommeiller; s/d/tr €53/63/70; ♿) There's nothing artistic about this hotel, with its flag-lined concrete facade, drab rooms or the rumble of trains. That said, it is well-run, cheap and central, located halfway between the town's centre and the train station.

 **Eating**
Le Savoyard SAVOYARD CUISINE €€
(☎04 79 33 36 55; 35 place Monge; mains €13-20; ☉Mon-Sat) The decor is resolutely non-alpine (urban design den rather than Savoyard chalet), but the menu is a wondrous selection of cheesy specialties. One fondue too many? Go for dishes like scallop risotto or steak with homemade *frites*.

Le Modesto Café BISTRO €
(☎04 79 68 74 64; 58 rue Ste-Real; menus €12-14; ☉Mon-Sat; ♿) A cellar turned snazzy lounge-style bar and bistro, intimate Modesto pairs huge salads, *tartines* (open sandwiches) and tapas with full-bodied wines by the glass. It occasionally hosts events and DJ nights.

La Maniguette FUSION €€
(☎04 79 62 25 28; 103 rue Juiverie; mains €16, 3-course menus €30; ☉Wed-Sat, lunch only Tue) Everything at this chic bistro goes the extra mile to add a dash of originality: the bread is home baked, the menu changes monthly and always adds a far-away twist to local flavours such as *magret de canard* (duck steaklet) with mango, polenta and Serrano ham.

L'Atelier INTERNATIONAL €€
(☎04 79 70 62 39; 59 rue de la République; menus €20-26) Soft light, tightly packed tables and mellow music set the scene in this contemporary bistro. The market-fresh menu changes daily and reveals Italian inflections in dishes like scallop risotto and veal osso bucco. There's a terrace for alfresco dining.

La Table de Marie TEA ROOM €
(193 rue Croix d'Or; mains €10-15; ☉closed Sun) This pocket-sized *salon de thé*, with prim, flowery decor, does lunchtime Savoyard specialties, but most locals go straight for dessert: scrumptious cakes and tarts, washed down with organic tea or hot chocolate.

Self-Catering

Chambéry's Saturday morning **food market** (on place du Palais de Justice until 2011 while the covered market on place de Genève gets some much-needed renovation) is a gastronome's rendezvous. Pedestrian rue du Sénat boasts butcher, baker and chocolate-maker shops.

Laiterie des Halles

GOURMET FOOD €

(2 place de Genève; ☎7.30am-12.15pm & 3-7.15pm Tue-Sat) Cheese fiends will go gaga at this dairy shop.

Monoprix

SUPERMARKET €

(place du 8 Mai 1945) Stock up on groceries.



Drinking

The huge square of place St-Léger is the summertime heart of Chambéry's drinking scene.

O'Cardinal's

PUB

(5 place de la Métropole; ☎10am-1.30am Tue-Sat, 5pm-1.30am Sun & Mon) Leather banquette seating, chipper staff and decent pub grub have turned this into Chambéry students' favourite pub. On warm days the cheer spills out onto cathedral-shaded place de la Métropole.

Le Café du Théâtre

CAFÉ

(place du Théâtre; ☎7am-1.30am; ☎) This tiny café, right next to Chambéry's 19th-century theatre, has a buzzy terrace for a cold beer, crêpe or ice cream. Students kick-start their evening here.



Information

Crédit Agricole (place du Château)

Crédit Lyonnais (26 bd de la Colonne)

Maison des Parcs et de la Montagne (www.maisondesparcsetdelamontagne.fr, in French; 256 rue de la République; ☎10am-noon & 2-7pm Tue-Sat) Stocks information and exhibitions on the three local parks: national park La Vanoise, and regional parks Les Bauges and La Chartreuse.

Post office (11 place de l'Hôtel de Ville)

Tourist office (☎04 79 33 42 47; www.chambery-tourisme.com; 5bis place du Palais de Justice; ☎9am-noon & 1.30-6pm Mon-Sat) Arranges guided old-town tours, including night visits, and has information on the local cheese and wine routes.



Getting There & Away

AIR There are no-frills flights to regional British airports including London Stansted, Manchester and Bristol from **Chambéry-Savoie Airport** (www.chambery-airport.com), 10km north of Chambéry in Viviers-du-Lac.

BUS From the **bus station** (place de la Gare) there are buses to/from local ski resort La Féclaz (€6, 50 minutes, four daily in winter) and Annecy (€6, one hour, seven daily). There are five daily buses to/from Grenoble (€12, 55 minutes).

TRAIN From Chambéry **train station** (place de la Gare) there are frequent trains to/from Paris Gare de Lyon (€93, four hours), Lyon (€16, 1½ hours), Annecy (€9, 50 minutes), Geneva (€15.50, 1½ hours) and Grenoble (€10.50, one hour). Nine daily trains run through the Maurienne Valley to Modane (€15, 1½ hours) and onwards into Italy. In town, buy tickets at the **SNCF Boutique** (21 place St-Léger).



Getting Around

TO/FROM THE AIRPORT Frustratingly, there are no bus services from Chambéry centre to the airport. The 15-minute journey by taxi costs around €20 – call **Allo Taxi Chambéry** (☎04 79 69 11 12). There are five daily buses to/from Geneva airport (€30, 1½ hours) and Lyon St-Exupéry airport (€22, one hour).

BICYCLE Pick up wheels for €2/10 per hour/day and advice on marked trails and itineraries from Vélo Station at the train station. The greater Chambéry area has 66km of cycling lanes.

BUS City buses run from 6am to around 8pm Monday to Saturday and are operated by **STAC** (www.bus-stac.fr, in French). A single ticket/24-hour pass/*carte* of 10 costs €1.10/2.90/7.50. They are sold at tobacconists and the **STAC information kiosk** (23 bd du Musée). Buses 3, 5, 6, 7 and 9 link the train station with Fontaine des Éléphants.

Around Chambéry

PARC NATUREL RÉGIONAL DE CHARTREUSE

The **Chartreuse Regional Nature Park** (www.parc-chartreuse.net, in French) safeguards the wild forested slopes of the Chartreuse massif, dubbed the 'desert' by the Chartreux monks who settled here more than 1000 years ago. Since 1737 the monks have been producing a herbal liquor from a secret mix of 130 different herbs and plants.

The **park headquarters** (☎04 76 88 75 20; www.chartreuse-tourisme.com) in St-Pierre de Chartreuse, 40km south of Chambéry, has information on visiting the Voiron **distillery** where the liquor is produced, and the **Musée de la Grande Chartreuse** (www.musee-grande-chartreuse.fr; La Correrie, St-Pierre de Chartreuse; adult/child €6/2.50; ☉10am-6.30pm Feb-Oct), which explores the monastery's millennium-long history and the monks' reclusive lifestyle.

PARC NATUREL RÉGIONAL DU MASSIF DES BAUGES

Northeast, outdoor enthusiasts can delve into 800 sq km of hiking and biking opportunities in the little-known **Massif des Bauges Regional Nature Park** (www.parcdesbauges.com) with its endless pastures and plateaux. Several marked trails kick off from the **Maison Faune-Flore** (adult/child €2.50/1.50; ☉10am-12.30pm & 1.30-6.30pm Tue-Sun) in École, where you can learn how to spot some of the 600-odd chamois and plethora of mouflons inhabiting the park.

Chambéry's favourite weekend retreat for a little snow action is nearby **Savoie Grand Révard** (www.savoiegrandrevard.com). Downhill skiing is limited to 50km of pistes, but cross-country skiing is superb with 140km of trails to explore, as is snowshoeing with 60km of marked itineraries.

Tourist offices in **Le Revard** (☎04 79 54 01 60), **La Féclaz** (☎04 79 25 80 49) and **Le Châtelard** (☎04 79 54 84 28; www.lesbauges.com) – the main office in the park – have more information.

AIX-LES-BAINS

POP 27,920 / ELEV 234M

With its leafy shores, grand casino and villas, Aix-les-Bains, a small thermal spa 11km northwest of Chambéry, exudes an air of discreet gentility. Come to sail, swim, pedal-boat, stroll or skate around France's largest natural lake, **Lac du Bourget**.

Contact **Compagnie des Bateaux** (www.gwel.com; 9am-12.30pm & 2-6pm Mon-Fri) at the waterfront Grand Port or the **tourist office** (☎04 79 88 68 00; www.aixlesbains.com; place Maurice Mollard; ☉9am-12.30pm & 2-6.30pm Mon-Sat) in town about lake cruises. A one-hour cruise costs €9.50 and a return trip to the 12th-century **Abbaye d'Hautecombe** on the other side of the lake is €13.

DON'T MISS

TO THE MANOR BORN

What better way to wake up than in the 19th-century manor house **Château des Allues** (☎06 75 38 61 56; www.chateaudesallues.com; Les Allues, St-Pierre d'Albigny; d €120-180, dinner adult/child €42/25), slung high on a hill and proffering sweeping views of the Belledonne range. Painstakingly restored by Stéphane and Didier, the château oozes elegance and originality in five spacious, lavishly furnished rooms, many with four-poster beds, copper fireplaces and antiques. Served at the family dining table, Stéphane's cooking makes excellent use of the herbs, vegetables and fruit that grow in the garden.

ALBERTVILLE

POP 18,680 / ELEV 328M

The main claim to fame of Albertville, an otherwise uninspiring town 39km east of Chambéry, is that it hosted the 1992 Winter Olympics. The highs and lows are colourfully retold at **Maison des Jeux Olympiques d'Hiver** (11 rue Pargoud; adult/family €3/8; ☉10am-noon & 2-6pm Mon-Sat).

Les Trois Vallées

This is the big one you've heard all about: vast, fast and the largest ski area in the world. The snow has never been hotter than in Les Trois Vallées. Some 600km of pistes and 174 lifts zip across three ritzy resorts: **Val Thorens**, Europe's highest at a heady 2300m; wealthy and ever-so-British **Méribel** (elevation 1450m), founded by Scotsman Colonel Peter Lindsay in 1938; and trendsetting **Courchevel**, which straddles three purpose-built resorts at 1550m, 1650m and 1850m, a fave of Victoria Beckham and the Gucci-shade, Moët-at-five brigade. In between is a sprinkling of lesser-known alpine villages – **Le Praz** (1300m), **St-Martin de Belleville** (1450m) and **La Tania** (1400m), linked by speedy lifts to their big-sister resorts.

Activities

Winter Activities

Les Trois Vallées appease the feistiest of outdoor-action appetites. Sunny **Méribel** is intermediate heaven, with 150km of cruisy (mostly blue and red) runs, 57 ski lifts, two snowboarding parks with jumps, pipes and rails, a slalom stadium and two Olympic runs.

In **Courchevel** there's another 150km of well-groomed pistes, including some knee-trembling black *couloirs* (steep gullies) for the brave, and excellent off-piste terrain. The 2km-long floodlit toboggan run through the forest is an adrenalin-pumping après-ski alternative.

Snow-sure **Val Thorens**, though smaller, proffers summer skiing on the Glacier de Péclet. The scenery unfolds slowly on 17km of winter walking and snowshoeing tracks and 100km of free cross-country trails. Save time queuing by buying your pass online at www.les3vallees.com.

Courchevel is big on alternative snow action, the key info point being **La Croisette** (place du Forum; ☎8.30am-7pm) in Courchevel 1850, where the **ESF** (www.esfcourchevel.com) resides in winter and the **Maison de la Montagne** year-round. The latter takes bookings for guided off-piste adventures, snowshoeing and ski mountaineering and ice climbing, and is home to the **Bureau des Guides** (☎04 79 01 03 66; www.guides-courchevel-meribel.com).

Summer Activities

Summer lures outdoorsy types to Les Trois Vallées for rock climbing, paragliding, and hiking to peaks, wildflower-strewn pastures and topaz lakes in Parc National de la Vanoise. Clip onto vertigo-inducing **via ferrate** (fixed-cable mountain routes) in Méribel and Courchevel to flirt with mountaineering. The resorts are interlaced with hundreds of kilometres of circuits and downhill runs for **mountain bikers**; a trail guide is available at tourist offices.

In July and August **Chardon Loisirs** (☎04 79 08 39 60; www.chardonloisirs.com; La Croisette) takes you white-water rafting on the Doron de Belleville River for €40.

Festivals & Events

Altitude Festival

COMEDY FESTIVAL

(www.altitudefestival.com) It's a laugh a minute at this Méribel festival in March,

a six-day shindig with stand-up comedy, DJs and concerts, which has previously welcomed the likes of Kate Tunstall and Al Murray.

X-Wing Rally

BIKE RALLY

(www.les3vallees.com/xwing) Ride like a pro at Les Trois Vallées' open-slope rally in April.

Boarderweek

SNOWBOARD EVENT

(www.boarderweek.com) Freestylers glide over to Val Thorens for competitions and parties in December.

Sleeping & Eating

There are accommodation services in **Courchevel** (☎04 79 08 14 44), **Méribel** (☎04 79 00 50 00; www.meribel-reservations.com) and **Val Thorens** (☎04 79 00 01 06). Most hotels and restaurants close from May to mid-June and September through November.

La Bouitte

BOUTIQUE HOTEL 

(☎04 79 08 96 77; www.la-bouitte.com; St-Marcel; d €265-312; 2-/3-course menus €69/86, mains €50-100; ☎) One word: wow. This Savoyard farmhouse, in warm wood and stone, invites lingering in its rustic-chic rooms and bubbly hot tub. The spa soothes with treatments like fragrant hay baths. René and Maxime Meilleur's fondness for alpine herbs and seasonal flavours shines through in their Michelin-starred restaurant and terrific cookery classes. La Bouitte is in St-Marcel, 1km south of St-Martin de Belleville.

Hôtel Les Arolles

CHALET 

(☎04 79 00 40 40; www.arolles.com; Méribel-Mottaret; r incl half board per person €130-160; ☎) This huge mountain chalet gets rave reviews for its perfect ski-in, ski-out location and comfortable, if not fancy, rooms. Classic Savoyard cooking, a log fire burning in the lounge, an indoor pool and games room sweeten the deal.

Hôtel Olympic

HOTEL 

(☎04 79 08 08 24; www.courchevelolympic.com; rue des Tovets, Courchevel 1850; d €138-148; ☎) You're just a joyous hop from the ski lifts at the Olympic. The bright, colourful rooms sport balconies and big bathtubs, though light sleepers should pack earplugs as noise travels. A generous breakfast fuels a day of slope-bashing fun, and there's a snug bar for après-ski chilling.

MELTING GLORY

Every restaurant in the Alps worth its weight offers *raclette*, *tartiflette* or fondue. To save cents but maximise the cheese, opt for the DIY option; most dairy shops will lend you the required apparatus provided you buy their ingredients. Here's a 'how to' guide for your own cheese fest.

Fondue Savoyarde

Made with three types of cheeses in equal proportions (Emmental, Beaufort and Comté) and dry white wine (about 0.4L of wine for 1kg of cheese). Melt the mix in a cast-iron dish on a hob, then keep it warm with a small burner on the table. Dunk chunks of bread in the cheesy goo.

Our tip: rub or add garlic to the dish – you'll have cheesy breath anyway, so what the hell.

Raclette

Named after the Swiss cheese, *raclette* is a combination of melting cheese, boiled potatoes, charcuterie and baby gherkins. The home *raclette* kit is an oval hotplate with a grill underneath and dishes to melt slices of cheese.

Our tip: avoid a sticky mess by greasing and pre-heating your grill, and go easy on the ingredients (less is more).

Tartiflette

Easy-peasy. Slice a whole Reblochon cheese lengthwise into two rounds. In an ovenproof dish, mix together slices of parboiled potatoes, crème fraîche, onions and lardons (diced bacon). Whack the cheese halves on top, bake for about 40 minutes at 180°C, and ta-da!

Our tip: more crème fraîche and more lardons (a sprinkle of nutmeg is also good).

Le Doron

CHALET €€

(04 79 08 60 02; <http://hoteldoron.mountainpub.com>; rte de la Chaudanne, Méribel-Centre; s/d/tr €121/146/177) It's strictly no frills and set above a rowdy Brit-styled pub, but the crowds still flock to Le Doron for its raucous après-ski and direct access to the pistes. Opposite the tourist office.

Le Farçon

GASTRONOMIC €€

(04 79 08 80 34; www.lefarcon.fr; La Tania; lunch menus €25, other menus €36-95) At this forest retreat, Michelin-starred chef Julien Machet puts an imaginative spin on Savoyard dishes, with taste sensations like parmesan-pineapple chestnut soup and organic suckling pig with polenta on the menu. The three-course €25 skiers' lunch would barely buy you a pizza elsewhere.

La Fromagerie

BISTRO €€

(04 79 08 55 48; Méribel-Centre; menus €20-30; ☺dinner) Only the tangiest, creamiest alpine cheeses feature at this deli and bistro duo. Try Méribel's tastiest fondues and *raclette* in the rustic cellar. Book ahead.

Evolution

INTERNATIONAL €€

(04 79 00 44 26; www.evolutionmeribel.com; Méribel-Centre; mains €16-21, menu incl wine €25; ☺) A funky après-ski bar-cum-restaurant, Evolution is lauded for its monster-sized English breakfasts, Sunday roasts and well-spiced curries. Richard is the man behind the eclectic live music programme and the Altitude Festival in March.



Drinking & Entertainment

Pace yourself for champagne-sipping, boot-wiggling après-ski in see-and-be-seen Courchevel and party-mad Méribel. Most places are open only when the flakes are falling.

Rond Point

BAR

(www.rondpointmeribel.com; Méribel-Rond Point; ☺9am-7.30pm) Jostle for terrace space during happy hour from 4pm to 5pm, then shimmy in your ski boots to pumping live music between mouthfuls of chips and toffee vodka (hey, don't knock it until you've tried it) at what seasonaires fondly call 'the Ronnie'.

Jack's Bar

BAR

(www.jacksbarmeribel.com; Méribel-Centre; ☎noon-2am; ☎) Jack's makes for one memorable hangover, whether you come for the cool drinks, the chatty staff or the cracking events line-up – stand-up comedy, air guitar contests, toss-the-bottle Sundays, bring-your-pants parties, you name it...

Some more favourites:

Le Kalico

BAR

(www.lekalico.com; Le Forum, Courchevel 1850; ☎9am-4am) Courchevel's affordable après-ski king. Live music and themed parties fuelled by bubblegum vodkas slide into clubby nights where DJs play to tireless revellers.

La Taverne

BAR

(www.tavernemeribel.com; Méribel-Centre; ☎8am-2am; ☎) Ski right up to the terrace, jam-packed with adrenalin junkies talking legendary descents. Shooters and lethal Jägermeister bombs complement live music and big-screen sports.

Dick's Tea Bar

CLUB

(www.dicksteabar.com; rte de Mussillon, Méribel; ☎9pm-4am) Méribel's clubbing mainstay rocks nightly to a stellar line-up of DJs, including the Ministry of Sound's Housexy tribe.

**Information**

Courchevel 1850 tourist office (☎04 79 08 00 29; www.courchevel.com; ☎9am-7pm) Sister offices at 1650m, 1550m and 1300m.

Méribel tourist office (☎04 79 08 60 01; www.meribel.net; Maison du Tourisme; ☎9am-7pm)

Val Thorens tourist office (☎04 79 00 08 08; www.valthorens.com; Maison de Val Thorens; ☎8.30am-7pm)

**Getting There & Away**

TO/FROM THE AIRPORT Frequent shuttle buses link all three resorts with Geneva (€75, 3½ hours) and Lyon St-Exupéry (€68, three to four hours) airports. There are also regular weekend buses between Chambéry airport and Moûtiers (€30, one hour), from where you can catch the shuttles to the resorts.

BUS There are up to 12 regional buses daily between Moûtiers and Méribel (€10, 45 minutes), Courchevel (€10, 40 to 60 minutes) and Val Thorens (€10, one hour) with **Transdev Savoie** (www.transavoie.com).

CAR & MOTORCYCLE The four-lane A43 links Chambéry (78km west) with the nearest town, Moûtiers, 18km north of Méribel. All ski resorts are signposted as you approach Moûtiers.

TRAIN Moûtiers is the nearest train station, with trains to/from Chambéry (€12.50, 1¼ hours) and TGVs galore to Paris between late December and March (€74, 3½ hours). **Eurostar** (www.eurostar.com) also operates direct trains to/from London during the winter season (return from €150, eight hours, overnight or day service, weekends only).

Val d'Isère

POP 1730 / ELEV 1850M

Ask skiers why they loyally return year after year to Val d'Isère and watch their eyes light up. For the awesome black runs and off-piste, say many; for the party vibe and dancing on the slopes, say some; because 'Val' is a *real* village with a heart and soul, others tell you. Whatever the reason, they all have one thing in common: one visit and they were hooked.

Lac du Chevril looms large on the approach to Val d'Isère, located in the upper Tarentaise Valley, 32km southeast of Bourg St-Maurice. The turquoise reservoir lake and its dam sidle up to Tignes (elevation 2100m), a purpose-built lakeside village that – together with Val d'Isère – forms the gargantuan Espace Killy skiing area, named after home-grown triple Olympic gold medallist Jean-Claude Killy. In February 2009 it staged the FIS World Alpine Skiing Championships.

**Activities****Winter Activities**

Espace Killy has mostly intermediate and advanced skiing on 300km of pistes between 1550m and 3450m, miles of glorious off-piste, and summer skiing on the Pissailas and Grande Motte glaciers. Ski touring is also fabulous, especially in the Parc National de la Vanoise. The snowboarders' **Snowspace Park** in La Daille has a half-pipe, tables, gaps, quarter-pipes and kicker ramps, while Tignes' runs attract both snowboarders and skiers.

Eschew skis in favour of snow-driven alternatives like ice climbing, snowmobiling, mushing and winter paragliding. Floodlit airboarding and snake-glass sledging sessions are held four times a

PATRICK ZIMMER: FOUNDER OF TOP SKI

Patrick is an ex-downhill racer and founder of Top Ski, France's oldest independent ski school.

Absolute Beginners

When beginners arrive in Val d'Isère, they think, 'Oh my God, it's too steep', but Espace Killy has some scenic green and blue runs, like the vast, sunny Belvedere plateau, with Mont Blanc views, and Leissières blue run near Pissailas glacier. The free nursery slopes in Val Village are great for getting a feel for skiing.

Advanced Skiing

The Face Olympique de Belvedere, used for World Cup events and the men's Olympic downhill, has fantastic views to Tignes and La Grande Motte [3656m]. It's so steep it's like diving into the village! Ski it first thing to get the morning sunshine. Forêt in Le Fornet is also good for a challenge.

Off-Piste

It all comes down to finding the best and safest snow conditions, so that's where experienced guides come in. Le Fornet to Grand Vallon, the Super L, and the Solaise classic Les Marmottes are just some of my favourites. Belvedere has incredible off-piste terrain like the Spatule and near-vertical Banane.

When to Go

Between December and February is best for powder snow. The long days and snow crust from March to May make for great telemark ski touring in the stunning Parc National de la Vanoise. Come for summer skiing on the Pissailas and Grande Motte glaciers.

week on the **Savonette** nursery slope opposite Val Village.

ESF

SKI SCHOOL

(☎04 79 06 02 34; carrefour des Dolomites; www.esfvaldisere.com) In slope-side Val Village.

STVI

LIFT PASSES

(www.stvi-valdisere.com, in French; ☎8.30am-7pm Mon-Fri & Sun, 8am-8pm Sat) Near ESF, sells lift passes. Unusually, beginner lifts opposite Val Village are free.

Top Ski

SKI LESSONS

(☎04 79 06 14 80; www.topskival.com) France's first and highly regarded independent ski school, dating from 1976, arranges one-to-one and group tuition in on- and off-piste skiing, boarding, ski touring and snowshoeing with expert guides.

Summer Activities

The valleys and trails weaving from Val d'Isère into the nearby Parc National de la Vanoise beg outdoor escapades.

Bureau des Guides

OUTDOOR ACTIVITIES

(☎06 14 62 90 24; www.guide-montagne-tarentaise.com) Be it hiking, mountain biking, canyoning or rock climbing, this office in the Killy Sport shop can arrange it.

Next door, the tourist office can give you details on family-friendly activities, from donkey trekking to farm visits.

Sleeping

Find out about availability and make reservations (essential in high season) through the **Centre de Réservation Hôtellerie** (☎04 79 06 18 90). For self-catering accommodation, contact **Val Location** (☎04 79 06 06 60). Prices vary widely, pricey being the common factor.

Hôtel L'Avancher

CHALET ☼☼

(☎04 79 06 02 00; http://avancher.com, in French; Val Village; s €90-170, d €170-206; ☎) The kind staff make you feel immediately welcome at this homey chalet, sheltering large pine-clad rooms with downy bedding. There's a small lounge with magazines, board games and a piano.

MILKY WAY

Part of Val d'Isère's charm is that it is a village with year-round residents. Claudine is one of them and she runs the delectable **La Fermette de Claudine** (www.lafermettedeclaudine.com, in French; Val Village), selling unpasteurised milk, wonderful cheeses and yoghurts. Her dairy farm **La Ferme de l'Adroit**, just 1km down the road in the direction of Col de l'Iseran, is open to the public and you can watch the morning cheese production (Tomme, Avalin, Beaufort) at 8.30am and afternoon milking at 5.30pm. All that dairy goodness lands on your plate in the form of deliciously gooey fondues and *raclette* at the neighbouring **L'Étable d'Alain** (☎04 79 06 13 02; www.fermedeladroit.com, in French; mains €22-29; 🍴), an attractively converted stable where you can feast away while watching cud-chewing cows in the adjacent barn. Book well ahead, especially if you want the popular 'cheese vat' table.

Chalet Hôtel Sorbiers

CHALET €€€

(☎04 79 06 23 77; www.hotelsorbiers-valdisere.com; Val Village; s/d/tr/q €190/258/369/388; 🍴) A chalet in the traditional alpine mould, this place has a fire crackling in the salon in winter and a sunny garden in summer. The cosy, well-kept rooms have wood trappings, balconies and some even, ahhh..., jacuzzi bathtubs. Breakfast is the works, with fresh pastries, eggs and bacon.

Relais du Ski & La Bailletta

HOTEL €€

(☎04 79 06 02 06; <http://lerelaisduski-valdisere.com>; rte Fornet, Val Village; s/d/tr/q incl breakfast Relais €90/108/126/160, Bailletta €145/176/216/300; 🍴) This hotel double act is a five-minute stroll from the centre. La Bailletta does comfortable midrange rooms while Relais du Ski has nine basic rooms with shared bathrooms. Both places share the buffet breakfast, which is a veritable feast.



Eating

Supermarkets, patisseries and assorted snack stops line Val Village. In winter popular tables fill up fast and reservations

are recommended. Most places open daily from December to April and have limited hours the rest of the year; if in doubt, call ahead.



La Fruitière

MODERN FRENCH €€

(☎04 79 06 07 17; mains €20-25; ☺lunch)

At the top of the La Daille bubble at 2400m, this piste-side oasis of fine dining is legendary. The creative cuisine is prepared with farm-fresh produce, paired with Grand Cru wines and served in a hip dairy setting. Save room for the Savoyard cheese plate. Snuggle under a blanket on the terrace to maximise those incredible mountain views.



L'Atelier d'Edmond

SAVOYARD CUISINE €€€

(☎04 79 00 00 82; Le Fornet; lunch mains €15-25, dinner menus €50-65; ☺closed dinner Sun & Mon) Candlelight bathes the stone walls, low beams and family heirlooms in this gorgeous chalet in Le Fornet, 2km east of Val Village. Locally sourced ingredients go into beautifully presented dishes like lobster and celery ravioli and flavoursome rack of lamb with garlic puree.

Wine Not

BISTRO €€

(☎04 79 00 48 97; Val Village; light meals €10-16) Bold colours, exposed stone and smooth contours make this wine bar Val's sleekest newcomer. Sizzling wok dishes, tapas sharing plates and salads are inspired by the 1st-class wine list, which does a Tour de France from the Rhône to Bordeaux.

Le Salon des Fous

CAFÉ €

(☎04 79 00 17 92; Val Village; sweets & snacks €2.50-10) With its bright-red benches and groovy lighting, this café is hip but never pretentious. Buttery smells waft from the kitchen, which rolls out homemade tarts, quiches, cakes and crêpes, plus an inventive selection of teas, like *la vie en rose* (vanilla, lemon and rose).

Bananas

INTERNATIONAL €€

(☎04 79 06 04 23; www.bananas.fr; Val Village; mains €14-22; ☺11.30am-2am; 🍴) This ultra-cool après-ski shack at the bottom of La Face, behind the Bellevarde Express, dishes up calorie-loaded fare. Join ravenous skiers for Tex-Mex, cheeseburgers with extra cheese and sticky brownies.



Drinking & Entertainment

Après ski in Val d'Isère is way up there with the craziest in the French Alps. Get hold of a copy of the free weekly *Mountain Echo*

magazine or *Valscope*, listing events and other organised fun. Here's our pick of the most happening bars:

La Folie Douce

BAR

(www.lafoledouce.com; Val Village; ☎noon-5pm)

If you can't wait to party until you're back in the village, DJs and live bands big it up every day on this outdoor terrace at the top of La Daille's cable car. Ibiza in the Alps.

Le Petit Danois

BAR

(www.lepetitdanois.com; Val Village; ☎8am-1.30am) Cheap beer, live music and lairy Swedes; thank God they serve full English breakfast the next morning to mop up the mess.

Dick's Tea Bar

CLUB

(www.dicksteabar.com; Val Village; ☎9am-4am) Val d'Isère's party HQ and the fabled home of the *vodka pomme* (apple vodka). Live music starts from 4.30pm; DJs follow later on in the night, all night.

Warm Up

BAR

(www.warmupvaldisere.com; Val Village; ☎11.30am-2am; ☎) Oh the cosy retro sofas, the gingerbread, hot chocolate and crème brûlée shooters, the free wi-fi, the pool table, the fun; it's the perfect après-ski spot..

Moris Pub

PUB

(http://morispub.mountainpub.com; Val Village; ☎4pm-2am) A buzzy British pub with happy hours, big-screen sports and almost nightly gigs – rock 'n' roll band Mullit regularly raises the roof.



Information

Tourist office (☎04 79 06 06 60; www.valdisere.com; place Jacques Mouffier; ☎8.30am-7.30pm; ☎) Internet access here costs €9 per hour or €5 for wi-fi.



Getting There & Away

TO/FROM THE AIRPORT In Bourg St-Maurice, you can connect to buses for Chambéry airport (one way/return €30/50, 1½ hours, weekend only). Other seasonal bus services include three or four daily to/from Geneva airport (one way/return €57/97, four hours) and two to five daily to/from Lyon St-Exupéry airport (one way/return €58/88, four hours). Advance reservations are essential.

BUS Six daily buses in season link Val d'Isère with Tignes (€3, 25 minutes) and Bourg St-Maurice train station (€10, 40 minutes). Tickets must be reserved 48 hours in advance at the **Boutique Autocars Martin** (☎04 79 06 00

42) on the main street in the resort centre. The SNCF desk here sells train tickets.

TRAIN Eurostar (www.eurostar.com) operates direct winter weekend services between Bourg St-Maurice and London (return from €180, eight hours, overnight or day service).

Parc National de la Vanoise

Rugged snowcapped peaks, mirrorlike lakes and vast glaciers are just the tip of the superlative iceberg in the 530-sq-km **Parc National de la Vanoise** (www.parc-national-vanoise.fr, in French), which fits neatly between the Tarentaise and Maurienne Valleys. This incredible swathe of wilderness was designated France's first national park in 1963. Five nature reserves and 28 villages border the highly protected core of the park where marmots, chamois and France's largest colony of alpine ibexes graze freely and undisturbed beneath the larch trees. Overhead, 20 pairs of golden eagles and the odd bearded vulture fly in solitary wonder.

A hiker's heaven, yes, although walking trails are only accessible for a fraction of the year – June to late September, usually. The **Grand Tour de Haute Maurienne** (www.hautemaurienne.com), a hike of five days or more around the upper reaches of the valley, takes in national-park highlights. The GR5 and GR55 cross it, and other trails snake south to the Parc National des Écrins and east into Italy's Grand Paradiso National Park.

You can base yourself in **Lanslebourg** and **Bonneval-sur-Arc**, two pretty villages along the southern edge of the park. The **Maison du Val Cénis** (☎04 79 05 23 66; www.valcenis.com; ☎9am-noon & 3-6pm Mon-Fri) in Lanslebourg, and Bonneval-sur-Arc's **tourist office** (☎04 79 05 95 95; www.bonneval-sur-arc.com; ☎9am-noon & 2-6.30pm Mon-Sat) stock practical information on the walking, limited skiing (cross-country and downhill) and other activities in the park. In Termignon-la-Vanoise, 6km southwest of Lanslebourg, the tiny national-park-run **Maison de la Vanoise** (☎04 79 20 51 67; admission free; ☎9am-noon & 2-5pm) portrays the park through ethnographical eyes.



Getting There & Away

CAR & MOTORCYCLE All three mountain passes linking the national park with Italy – the

Col du Petit St-Bernard, Col de l'Iseran and Col du Mont Cénis – are shut in winter.

TRAIN Trains serving the valley leave from Chambéry and run as far as Modane, 23km southwest of Lanslebourg, from where **Trans-dev Savoie** (www.transavoie.com) runs three to four daily buses to/from Termignon-la-Vanoise (€6, 40 minutes). Val Cénis-Lanslebourg (€10, 50 minutes) and Bonneval-sur-Arc (€10, 1¼ hours).

DAUPHINÉ

Apart from its celebrated *gratin dauphinois*, the Dauphiné's other big legacy to the French lexicon is historical. In 1339 Dauphiné ruler Humbert II established a university in Grenoble. A decade later, lacking money and a successor, he sold Dauphiné to the French king, Charles V, who started the tradition whereby the eldest son of the king of France (the crown prince) ruled Dauphiné and bore the title 'dauphin'.

Today, the Dauphiné refers to territories south and southwest of Savoy, stretching from the River Rhône in the west to the Italian border in the east. It includes the city of Grenoble and the mountainous Parc National des Écrins further east. The gentler terrain of western Dauphiné is typified by the Parc Naturel Régional du Vercors, much loved by cross-country skiers. In the east, the storybook town of Briançon stands sentinel on the Italian frontier.

Grenoble

POP 159,400 / ELEV 215M

With a dress-circle location overlooking the jagged mountains of the Parc Naturel Régional de Chartreuse and the Parc Naturel Régional du Vercors, Grenoble's backdrop is nothing short of extraordinary. That said, the city itself is not an instant heart-stealer with its tower blocks, run-of-the-mill hotels and traffic. Yet despite initial appearances, Grenoble rewards those who make the detour en route to the slopes – fine museums and restaurants, a quaint *quartier des Antiquaires* (Antiques quarter) and effervescent nightlife buoyed by some 60,000 students are all here for the taking.



Sights

Many of Grenoble's museums are free on the first Sunday of the month.



Musée de Grenoble

GALLERY

(Musée des Beaux-Arts; www.musee degrenoble.fr, in French; 5 place de Lavalette; adult/child €5/free; ☺10am-6.30pm Wed-Mon) The glass and steel facade of Grenoble's boldest museum occupies an entire block. Also called the Musée des Beaux-Arts, the museum is renowned for its distinguished modern collection, including star pieces by Chagall, Matisse, Canaletto, Monet and Picasso. The classic collection is equally impressive, spanning works from the 13th to 19th century.

Fort de la Bastille

FORTRESS

(www.bastille-grenoble.com) Crowning a hillside above the River Isère, this 19th-century fort is Grenoble's most visible landmark. Built high and mighty to withstand invasions by the dukes of Savoy, the stronghold has long been a focus of military and political action.

Today it lures camera-toting crowds with its far-reaching views over Grenoble and the swiftly flowing River Isère to the peaks of the Vercors and, on cloud-free days, the snowy hump of Mont Blanc. Panels map out trails from gentle family walks to day hikes.

To get to the fort, hop aboard the riverside **Téléphérique Grenoble Bastille** (quai Stéphane Jay; adult/child one way €4.50/2.90, return €6.50/4.05; ☺Feb-Dec). The ascent in glass bubbles, which climb 264m from the quay, is almost more fun than the fort itself. Leave early to beat the queues in summer, or take a pleasant hour's walk uphill (half an hour down).

Magasin Centre National d'Art Contemporain

ART GALLERY

(National Centre of Contemporary Art; www.magasin-cnac.org; 155 cours Berriat; adult/child €3.50/2; ☺2-7pm Tue-Sun) Ensnconed in a cavernous glass and steel warehouse built by Gustave Eiffel, this is one of Europe's leading centres of contemporary art. A must-see for its architecture alone, the gallery plays host to cutting-edge exhibitions, many designed specifically for the space. Take tram A to Berriat-Le Magasin stop, about 2km west of the town centre.



Musée Dauphinois

REGIONAL MUSEUM

(www.musee-dauphinois.fr, in French; 30 rue Maurice Gignoux; ☺10am-7pm Wed-Mon) Atmospherically set in a 17th-century convent, this museum spells out alpine

cultures, crafts and traditions, and the region's skiing history. The museum is nestled at the foot of the hill below Fort de la Bastille.

FREE Musée de l'Ancien Évêché

HISTORY MUSEUM

(www.ancien-eveche-isere.fr, in French; 2 rue Très Cloîtres; ☉9am-6pm Wed-Sat & Mon, 10am-7pm Sun, 1.30-6pm Tue) On place Notre Dame, the Italianate **Cathédrale Notre Dame** and adjoining 13th-century **Bishops' Palace** – originally home to Grenoble's bishops – form this museum. The rich collection traces local history from prehistory to the 21st century, and takes visitors beneath the cathedral square to a crypt safeguarding old Roman walls and a baptistry dating from the 4th to 10th centuries.

FREE Musée de la Résistance et de la Déportation de l'Isère

HISTORY MUSEUM

(www.resistance-en-isere.fr, in French; 14 rue Hébert; ☉9am-6pm Mon & Wed-Fri, 1.30-6pm Tue, 10am-6pm Sat & Sun) This emotive museum examines the deportation of Jews and other 'undesirables' from Grenoble to Nazi camps during WWII in a cool-headed way. It also zooms in on the role of the Vercors region in the French Resistance.



Activities

To jump lift-pass queues in Grenoble's surrounding ski resorts, buy your pass in advance from the tourist office or the *billetterie* (ticket office) inside **Fnac** (119 Grand Place; ☉9.30am-8pm Mon-Sat).

Maison de la Montagne

MOUNTAIN ACTIVITIES

(www.grenoble-montagne.com; 3 rue Raoul Blanchard; ☉9.30am-12.30pm & 2-6pm Mon-Fri, 10am-1pm & 2-5pm Sat) Get the scoop on mountain activities around Grenoble – skiing, snowboarding, ice climbing, walking, mountain biking, rock climbing and more – here. The knowledgeable staff can help plan trips and treks with *refuge* stays, or book activities. It sells an excellent range of maps, walking books and topoguides, and runs a library that is free to consult. For walks around Grenoble, ask for the free SIPAVAG maps and itineraries.

Club Alpin Français de l'Isère

ALPINE CLUB

(32 av Félix Viallet; www.clubalpin-grenoble.com, in French; ☉2-6pm Tue & Wed, to 8pm Thu & Fri) Runs most of the *refuges* in the area and posts a list of activities in its window.

Bureau des Guides et Accompagnateurs de Grenoble

MOUNTAIN GUIDES

(www.guide-grenoble.com, in French; Maison de la Montagne) If it's a guide you're after, this outfit runs the whole gamut of summer and winter activities.



Tours

The tourist office organises imaginative thematic **walking tours** (€6-12.50), in French only, including a two-hour stroll in the footsteps of Grenoble-born novelist Stendhal, museums and various industry-focused tours. Those who'd rather go it alone can hire a two-hour MP3 audioguide (English available; €5) at the tourist office.



Festivals & Events

Grenoble Jazz Festival

JAZZ FESTIVAL

(www.jazzgrenoble.com, in French) Jazz greats headline this March festival; MC2 is the venue for many concerts.

Vues d'en Face

FILM FESTIVAL

(www.vuesdenface.com, in French) The rainbow flag flies high for this gay and lesbian film fest in April.

Cabaret Frappé

MUSIC FESTIVAL

(www.cabaret-frappe.com, in French) Catch poolside concerts in July.

Festival des 38e Rugissants

MUSIC FESTIVAL

(www.38rugissants.com) Nomadic beats in November.



Sleeping

Sleeping in Grenoble is a bit of a let-down. Though good value, hotels tend to be soulless and the reluctant preserve of passing business people. The tourist office has a list of *chambres d'hôte* in the area.

Patrick Hôtel

MODERN HOTEL €€

(☎04 76 21 26 63; www.patrickhotel-grenoble.com; 116 cours de la Libération; s/d €89/99; ☹☹) Streamlined and contemporary, the rooms here sport flatscreen TVs and free wi-fi. Rates drop by around 40% at weekends. The hotel is on a busy road 2km south of the centre (just off the A480) and has private parking.

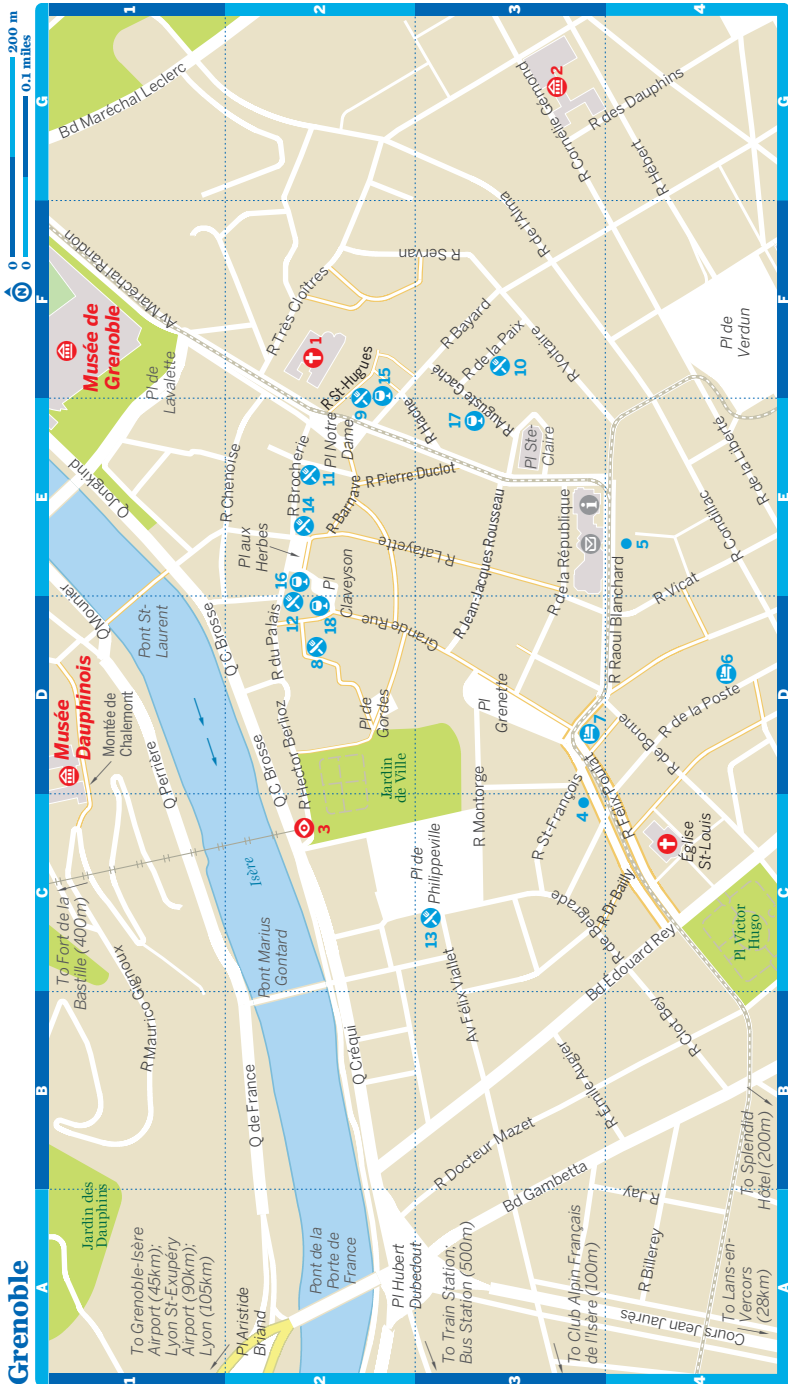


Auberge de Jeunesse

HOSTEL €

(☎04 76 09 33 52; www.fuaj.org, in French; 10 av du Grésivaudan; dm incl breakfast €19; @) Green, clean and ultramodern, Grenoble's eco-conscious hostel is set in parkland, 5km from the centre. The top-notch facilities include a bar, kitchen and sun deck. Take

Grenoble



Grenoble

📍 Top Sights

Musée Dauphinois	D1
Musée de Grenoble	F1

📍 Sights

Bishop's Palace	(see 1)
1 Cathédrale Notre Dame	F2
2 Musée de la Résistance et de la Déportation de l'Isère	G3
Musée de l'Ancien Évêché	(see 1)
3 Téléphérique Grenoble Bastille	C2

Activities, Courses & Tours

Bureau des Guides et Accompagnateurs de Grenoble	(see 5)
4 Fnac	C3
5 Maison de la Montagne	E4

🛏 Sleeping

6 Hôtel de la Poste	D4
7 Hôtel de l'Europe	D3

🍴 Eating

8 Café de la Table Ronde	D2
9 Chez Mémé Paulette	E2
10 Ciao a Te	F3
11 La Fondue	E2
12 La Peña Andaluza	D2
13 Le Dix Vins	C3
14 L'Épicurien	E2

🍷 Drinking

15 Le 365	F2
16 Le Couche Tard	E2
17 Le Tord Boyaux	E3
18 Styx	D2

bus 1 to La Quinzaine stop, from where the hostel is an easy two-minute walk (follow the signs). Alternatively, take tram A to La Rampe and walk east 15 minutes (roughly 1.5km).

Splendid Hôtel

HOTEL €€

(☎04 76 46 33 12; www.splendid-hotel.com; 22 rue Thiers; s €59, d €75-95; 🏠📶) Colourful, fresh and jazzed up with funky paintings, this is a welcome break from Grenoble's dreary hotel scene. Some of the simple, cosy rooms have hydromassage showers and all have wi-fi. Take a seat in the leafy courtyard for a copious breakfast with fresh pastries and fruit.

Hôtel de l'Europe

HISTORIC HOTEL €

(☎04 76 46 16 94; www.hoteleurope.fr; 22 place Grenette; s €31-45, d €41-70) On Grenoble's liveliest square, this 17th-century haunt retains some charm. The snazzy hot-pink breakfast room and grand spiral staircase promise good things, making the rooms something of an anticlimax with their '70s-style wallpaper and postage-stamp bathrooms.

Hôtel de la Poste

SMALL HOTEL €

(☎04 76 46 67 25; 25 rue de la Poste; s/d/tr €39/47/60; 🏠📶) Beautifully renovated and oozing old-school charm, these rambling private rooms are a well-kept secret. Some have shared facilities, kept spotlessly clean. Best of all, you get use of the kitchen. Rooms B3 and B5 are top picks.

🍴 Eating

Grenoble's most atmospheric bistros huddle down the backstreets of the *quartier des Antiquaires*. As Dauphiné capital, Grenoble is the place to sample *gratin dauphinois* (finely sliced potatoes oven-baked in cream and a pinch of nutmeg).



Chez Mémé Paulette

CAFÉ €

(☎04 76 51 38 85; 2 rue St-Hugues; snacks €3-5.50, plat du jour €8; ☺noon-midnight Tue-Sat) Mémé Paulette is an old curiosity shop of a café, crammed with antique books, milk jugs, cuckoo clocks and other eye-catching collectables. It draws a young, arty crowd with its boho vibe and wallet-friendly soul food, from chunky soups to *tartines* and homemade tarts.

Ciao a Te

ITALIAN €€

(☎04 76 42 54 41; 2 rue de la Paix; mains €15; ☺Tue-Sat, closed Aug) Stylish yet relaxed, Ciao dishes up authentic Italian cuisine: handmade pasta, crispy *panzerotti* (filled pastries), tender veal and the freshest seafood in town. It's a Grenoblois favourite, so book ahead.

L'Épicurien

MODERN FRENCH €€

(☎04 76 51 96 06; 1 place aux Herbes; menus €25-41) Chandeliers cast flattering light on the leather banquettes, exposed stone and twisting wrought-iron staircase of this chic split-level restaurant. An aperitif at the bar whets your appetite for flavours such as creamy *gratin dauphinois* and herb-crusted lamb.

Le Dix Vins

FUSION €€

(☎04 76 17 14 72; 4 rue de Belgrade; menus €17-38; ☎Mon-Sat; 🍷) Pink, black and graced with floral motifs, this diva of a restaurant flaunts a menu as creative as its decor. Try the Dauphiné ravioli filled with gambas (a kind of shrimp) and coriander or the palate-cleansing strawberry and mint soup. There's a €7 kids' menu.

Café de la Table Ronde

BISTRO €€

(☎04 76 44 51 41; 7 place St-André; lunch menus €10, dinner menus €22-30; ☎9am-midnight; 🍷) All hail this historic 1739 café, once the beloved haunt of Stendhal and Rousseau. Soak up the atmosphere on the square over regional fare like braised *diots* (mountain sausages) with *gratin dauphinois*, and nutty *tarte aux noix* (walnut tart).

La Peña Andaluza

TAPAS €€

(☎04 76 00 07 77; 3 rue du Palais; tapas €3.50-5.50, mains €17-20; ☎11.30am-1am) Salsa rhythms, moreish tapas and sangria bring southern Spanish pizzazz to Grenoble at this informal, mosaic-tiled bar.

La Fondue

FRENCH €€

(☎04 76 15 20 72; 5 rue Brocherie; fondue €17-20; ☎lunch Tue-Sat, dinner Mon-Sat) Gorge on so-smooth fondues laced with kirsch, Génépi and chartreuse or (double gorge) chocolate. An assortment of *raclettes* and *tartiflettes* completes the mountain cheese feast.

**Drinking & Entertainment**

Like every good student city, Grenoble does a mean party. Click onto French-language www.grennews.com and www.petit-bulletin.fr for details on what's happening. Here are a few places to get you started:

Le 365

WINE BAR

(3 rue Bayard; ☎Tue-Sat) If Dionysus (god of wine) had a house, this is surely what it would look like: an irresistible clutter of bottles, oil paintings and candles that create an ultrareaxed setting for quaffing one of the wines on offer.

Le Tord Boyaux

WINE BAR

(4 rue Auguste Gaché; ☎6pm-2am) More than 30 flavoured wines, some of them quite extravagant (violet, chestnut, Génépi, fig), and a blind test every Tuesday night to see how many your taste buds can recognise.

Le Couche Tard

BAR

(1 rue du Palais) If you're too cool for school, check out the 'go to bed late', a grungy pub

that actively encourages you to graffiti its walls. The merrier you become during happy hour (until 10pm daily), the more imaginative those doodles become...

Styx

BAR

(6 place Claveyson; ☎1pm-2am Mon-Sat) Designer cocktails, DJs, soft red light and attitude by the shakerload. The terrace is a favourite hang-out on warm evenings.

MC2

THEATRE

(☎04 76 00 79 00; www.mc2grenoble.fr, in French; 4 rue Paul Claudel) Grenoble's most dynamic all-rounder for theatre, dance, opera, jazz and other music. It's 2km south of the centre on tram line A, stop MC2.

La Soupe aux Choux

JAZZ CLUB

(☎04 76 87 05 67; <http://jazzalasoupe.free.fr>, in French; 7 rte de Lyon; ☎Tue-Sat) Going strong for some 25 years, 'cabbage soup' stirs live jazz from swing to blues into Grenoble's after-dark mix. Find it a five-minute walk west of the Musée Dauphinois.

i Information

Wi-fi is widely available at hotels, cafés and bars in Grenoble; the tourist office has a list of free hot-spots.

Celsius Café (15 rue Jean-Jacques Rousseau; internet per 30/60min €1.50/2.50; ☎9am-8pm, closed Sat morning, Mon; 📶) Top location and facilities.

Cyber Phone (2bis rue Très-Clôîtres; internet per 15/60min €0.50/2) Speedy internet and discount calls.

Duty pharmacy (☎04 76 63 42 55)

Grenoble University Hospital (☎04 76 76 75 75) Hôpital Nord La Tronche (av de Marquis du Grésivaudan; La Tronche tram stop); Hôpital Sud (av de Kimberley, Échirolles; bus 11 or 13).

Post office (rue de la République) Next to the tourist office.

Tourist office (☎04 76 42 41 41; www.grenoble-tourisme.com; 14 rue de la République; ☎9am-6.30pm Mon-Sat, 10am-1pm & 2-5pm Sun) Inside the Maison du Tourisme. Sells maps and guides, arranges city tours.

i Getting There & Away

AIR A clutch of budget airlines, including Ryanair and easyJet, fly between **Grenoble-Isère Airport** (www.grenoble-airport.com), 45km northwest of Grenoble, and London, Glasgow, Stockholm and Warsaw, among others.

BUS The **bus station** (rue Émile Gueymard), next to the train station, is the main terminus for bus companies, including **VFD** (www.vfd).

fr, in French) and **Transisère** (www.transisere.fr, in French). There are several services daily to Geneva airport (€43, 2½ hours), Lyon St-Exupéry airport (€22, one hour), Chamrousse (€3.20, 1¼ hours), Bourg d'Oisans (€6, 50 minutes), Les Deux Alpes (€5.50, 1¼ hours) and Briançon (€29, 2½ hours). **Eurolines** (www.eurolines.com) handles international destinations.

CAR & MOTORCYCLE Grenoble is well connected to motorways including the A48 (Lyon), A41 (Chambéry, Annecy) and the A51 (Marseille). Major car-hire agencies are in the Europole complex underneath the train station.

TRAIN From the **train station** (rue Émile Gueymard), trains run frequently to/from Paris Gare de Lyon (from €76, 3½ hours), Chambéry (€10.50, one hour) and Lyon (€19, 1½ hours). Train tickets are sold at the station and in town at the **SNCF boutique** (15 rue de la République).

Getting Around

TO/FROM THE AIRPORT Shuttle buses run by **Grenoble Altitude** (<http://grenoble-altitude.com>) go to/from Grenoble-Isère Airport and the bus station (one way/return €12.50/22, 45 minutes, twice daily on Tuesday and Saturday).

BICYCLE Underneath the train station, **Mé-trovélo** (www.metrovelo.fr) rents out bikes for €3/5 per half-/full day. Helmets, child's seat and locks are free. You'll need ID and €50 deposit per bike.

BUS & TRAM Grenoble's four ecofriendly tram lines – A, B, C and D – trundle through the heart of town. A single-trip bus and tram ticket costs €1.40 from ticket machines or drivers. Before boarding, time-stamp your ticket in the blue machines at stops. *Carnets* of 10 tickets (€11.50) and day passes (€3.90) can only be bought at TAG inside the tourist office or next to the train station. Trams run from around 5am to 1am; bus services run until 6pm or 9pm.

CAR & MOTORCYCLE Grenoble is tricky to negotiate because of its bewildering one-way system, disorientating tram network and expensive, limited parking. Your best bet is to head to one of the 13 **P+R** (www.semitag.com, in French) on the outskirts of town, which cost €2 to €3 per day and include a free return tram or bus ride for you and your passengers.

Around Grenoble

Grenoble's high-altitude surrounds lure urbanites craving a weekend snow fix. The vast Vercors plateau is laced with a cool 1000km of cross-country trails, many weaving through snow-dusted forests. Affording sweeping views of the rugged Belledonne massif, **Chamrousse** (elevation

1700m) attracts families with its beginner-level downhill in winter and gentle hikes through marmot-dotted pastures in summer. The **tourist office** (☎04 76 89 92 65 www.chamrousse.com; 42 place de Belledonne) has the full lowdown.

Several daily buses link Grenoble with the surrounding resorts (see those sections for details), including Chamrousse (€3.20, 1¼ hours). For day trippers, the Skiligne buses operated by Transisère to 11 different ski resorts in the region are a good deal; rates (from €23 in Chamrousse and Villard de Lans to €37 for Les Deux Alpes and Alpe d'Huez) include a one-day ski pass and return bus fare.

PARC NATUREL RÉGIONAL DU VERCORS

The gently rolling pastures, plateaus and chiselled limestone peaks of this 1750-sq-km nature park, southwest of Grenoble, are great for soft adventure. Quieter and cheaper than neighbouring alpine resorts, the wildlife-rich park is a magnet to families seeking fresh air and activities like cross-country skiing, snowshoeing, caving and hiking.

From pristine, wooded **Lans-en-Vercors** (elevation 1020m) 28km southwest of Grenoble, buses shuttle downhill skiers 4km east to its 24km Montagnes de Lans ski area. The postcard-perfect village of **Villard de Lans** (elevation 1050m), 9km up the valley, is linked by ski lifts to **Villard-Corrençon** for 130km of winter-wonderland downhill pistes at melting prices (€30 for a day). For more snowy fun, the **Colline des Bains** (1/3hr pass €9/12), in Villard de Lans, comprises six sledging tracks: pick your vehicle (solo sledge, rubber ring or bobsleigh) to whiz down.

Villard de Lans' **tourist office** (www.villarddelans.com; place Mure Ravaud) has an online service for booking hotels, farmstays and *chambres d'hôte*, and should be your first port of call for activities from canyoning to mountain biking in the Vercors.



Les Accompagnateurs Nature et Patrimoine (☎04 76 95 08 38; www.accompagnateur-vercors.com) allows you to get in tune with nature on half-day (adult/child €15/13) and day walks (adult/child €21/26), with knowledgeable guides who can point out alpine wildflowers and animals from marmots to chamois.

GREAT ESCAPES

The Vercors has some dreamy chalets and back-to-nature farmhouses. These three are among our favourite escapes; see their websites for maps and details of how to get there.

Les Allières (☎04 76 94 32 32; www.aubergedesallieres.com, in French; Lans-en-Vercors; half board per person €45, mains €16-25). This 1476m-high forest chalet offers no-frills digs (bunk beds, shared toilets) and wondrous mountain food. The wood-fire *raclette* and *tarte aux myrtilles* (blueberry tart) are divine.

À la Crécia (☎04 76 95 46 98; www.gite-en-vercors.com, in French; 436 Chemin des Cléments, Lans-en-Vercors; s/d/tr/q €52/57/72/87, dinners €17; 🍴) Goats, pigs and poultry rule the roost at this 16th-century, solar-powered farm, authentically renovated by Véronique and Pascal. Rooms are stylishly rustic with beams, earthy hues and mosaic bathrooms. Dinner is a feast of farm-fresh produce.

Gîte La Verne (☎04 76 95 21 18; <http://gite.laverne.free.fr>, in French; La Verne, Méaudre; apt for 4/8 people per week €500/750) Fitted with fully equipped kitchens, this *gîte's* beautiful apartments blend alpine cosiness with mod cons. Whether you opt for self-catering or half board, you'll enjoy the hammam and outdoor Norwegian bath as well as owner Edwige's wonderful hospitality.

Getting There & Away

Up to seven **Transisère** (<http://transisere.altibus.com>) buses daily link Grenoble with Lans-en-Vercors (€4.30, 45 minutes), Villard de Lans (€4.30, one hour) and Corrençon-en-Vercors (€4.30, 1¼ hours).

PARC NATIONAL DES ÉCRINS

No amount of hyperbole about towering peaks, shimmering cirque lakes and wispy falls can quite do justice to the wild **Parc National des Écrins** (www.les-ecrins-parc-national.fr, in French). Created in 1973, this is France's second-largest national park (918 sq km). Stretching between the towns of Bourg d'Oisans, Briançon and Gap, the area is enclosed by steep, narrow valleys, and sculpted by the Romanche, Durance and Drac rivers and their erstwhile glaciers. It peaks at 4102m with the arrow-shaped Barre des Écrins, a mythical summit for mountaineers.

Bourg d'Oisans, 53km southeast of Grenoble, and Briançon, another 67km in the same direction, are good bases for exploring the park.

BOURG D'OISANS

ELEV 720M

Sights & Activities

Age-old footpaths used by shepherds and smugglers centuries before – 700km in all – criss-cross the national park, making it prime hiking territory. A gateway to sev-

eral vertiginous mountain passes, Bourg d'Oisans is also a mountain-biking mecca. Check out www.bikes-oisans.com for details on trails, maps and bike hire. Kayaking along the Drac's turquoise waters, rock climbing, *via ferrate* and paragliding are other activities; tourist and park offices have details.

Musée des Minéraux et de la Faune des Alpes

MUSEUM

(place de l'Église, Bourg d'Oisans; adult/child €4.60/2; ☎2-6pm Wed-Mon) Bone up on the national park's fascinating geology, flora and fauna, including ibex and chamois, at this nature-savvy museum.

Chemin de Fer de la Mure

TRAIN RIDE

(www.trainlamure.com; adult/child return €19.20 /9.70; ☎2-4 departures daily Apr-Oct) In summer you can mammal-spot amid spectacular scenery from the window of this pillar-box-red 1920s mountain train. It chugs 30km (1¼ hours) between St-Georges de Commiers and La Mure, burrowing through tunnels, skirting sheer cliffs and traversing viaducts.

Sleeping & Eating

The tourist office in Bourg d'Oisans knows about *gîtes d'étape* (walkers' guesthouses) open year-round.

Au Fil des Saisons

B&B €

(☎04 76 30 07 01; www.chambresdhotels-afs.com, in French; Ferme du Cros, Les Côtes

de Corps; s/d €50/60; 🏠) Dany and Domi extend a heartfelt welcome at this lovingly converted 1731 mountain farm with beamed and vaulted ceilings. Breakfast is a wholesome spread with organic homemade bread and honey, and farm-fresh cheese. Kids love Hôtesse the draft horse. Find the Ferme du Cros 2km from Corps in Les Côtes de Corps; follow the southbound N85 from Grenoble. Advance reservations essential.

La Cascade

CAMPGROUND €

(📞04 76 80 02 42; www.lacascadesarenne.com; rte de l'Alpe d'Huez; sites €14-26; ☺mid-Dec-Sep; 🚰) A tree-shaded campground 1.5km from the centre of Bourg d'Oisans.

Le Colporteur

CAMPGROUND €

(📞04 76 79 11 44; www.camping-colporteur.com; Le Mas de Plan; sites €18-25; ☺mid-May-mid-Sep, @🚰) Well-equipped campground with a restaurant-bar, a two-second hop from Bourg d'Oisans.

Information

Maison du Parc (rue Gambetta, Bourg d'Oisans; ☺9-11.30am & 2-5pm Mon-Thu, 9-11am Fri) Sells maps and guides.

Oisans (www.tourisme-oisans.com) An excellent source of information on the area, with accommodation and activities listings.

Tourist office (www.bourgdoidsans.com, Bourg d'Oisans; quai Girard; ☺9am-noon & 2-6pm Mon-Sat, 9-11am Sun)

Getting There & Away

From Bourg d'Oisans **bus station** (av de la Gare), there are two or three buses daily to/from Briançon (€14.50, 1¾ hours), Les Deux Alpes (€2.10, 40 minutes) and Alpe d'Huez (€2.10, 40 minutes), and up to eight daily to/from Grenoble (€6, 50 minutes).

LES DEUX ALPES

ELEV 1600M

Year-round skiing on the 3200m- to 3425m-high Glacier du Mont de Lans, glorious powder for off-piste fans, challenging terrain parks and a party to rival anywhere in the French Alps – Les Deux Alpes, once two humble farming villages, is now a buzzing resort with altitude, located 19km south-east of Bourg d'Oisans.

Freeriders come from far and wide to tackle the breathtaking, near-vertical Vallons de la Meije descent in **La Grave** (www.la-grave.com), 21km east. The stuff of myth, the run plummets 2150m and is strictly for the crème de la crème of off-piste riders.

Sights

Grotte de Glace

ICE CAVE

(Ice Cave; admission €4; ☺10am-3pm) Ice sculptures of metre-tall animals, alpine flowers and shepherds glisten in this ice cave, carved into the Glacier du Mont de Lans at Dôme de Puy Salié (3425m). To reach it, ride the Jandri Express *télécabine* to 3200m and then the Funiculaire Dôme Express to 3400m. Allow an hour to get there. A ticket covering cable cars and cave entry costs €25.

La Croisière Blanche

SCENIC RIDE

(The White Cruise; per ride €7; ☺10.30am-3pm Sun-Fri) Take a panoramic 50-minute ride on this caterpillar-track minibus. Though undeniably gimmicky, it does allow nonskiers to tickle the summit at 3600m and enjoy 360-degree views. Wrap up for subzero temperatures. Cruise plus cable cars plus ice cave costs €32. You *must* book before you head off.

Activities

Les Deux Alpes pounds the powder on 225km of pistes and a 2600m-high **snow-park** (www.2alpes-snowpark.com) with an 800m-long axe pipe, 120m-long half-pipe, and numerous jumps as well as technical courses along cornice drops, canyons and corridors in the 'slide' zone. The main skiing domain lies below **La Meije** (3983m), one of the highest peaks in the Parc National des Écrins. Riders wanting to access La Grave from Les Deux Alpes are pulled by a snowcat from the top of the **Dôme Express Funicular** (☺8am-5pm late Nov-Apr, 7am-1pm mid-Jun-Aug). In winter, use of the funicular is included in the cost of your ski pass (see p466); a day pass in summer costs €33.50.

Skiing and boarding aside, snow fiends can dart around the **open-air rink** (resort centre, rue des Sagnes; €3.50; ☺3-6.30pm & 8.30-10.30pm mid-Jun-Aug & late Nov-Apr, ice-gliding Thu afternoon & Fri evening winter, Wed evening & Thu afternoon summer) in an ice-glider (dodgems on ice) or go on a snowmobile (*motoneige*) expedition. Contact the Bureau des Guides for organised ice climbing, snowshoeing and off-piste skiing in winter, and rock climbing, canyoning and biking expeditions in summer.

The glacier has Europe's largest **summer skiing** area, set against the majestic backdrop of Mont Blanc, Massif Central and Mont Ventoux; the season runs from

mid-June to late August. Otherwise there are 26 nail-biting descents and five cross-country trails for mountain bikers, numerous hiking trails and plenty of opportunities for paragliding.

Sleeping & Eating

Hotels and restaurants go with the seasons, most opening from December to April and mid-June to August.

Hotel Côte Brune

FAMILY HOTEL €€

(04 76 80 54 89; www.hotel-cotebrune.com; 6 rue Côte Brune; d incl half board €164-184; ) Ski in and out of this slope-side hotel. The homely pine-panelled rooms radiate alpine charm and come with south-facing balconies; some are geared up for families. Nurse drinks by an open fire or on the terrace before a delicious three-course dinner.

Hotel Serre-Palas

CHALET €

(04 76 80 56 33; www.hotelserre-palas.fr; 13 place de Venosc; d incl breakfast €70-106) For bright, quiet rooms and marvellous mountain views, you can't beat this spick-and-span chalet. Lionel, your affable host, is a ski instructor and can give you plenty of insider tips.

Le P'tit Polyte

GASTRONOMIC €€

(04 76 80 56 90; www.chalet-mounier.com; Chalet Mounier, 2 rue de la Chapelle; menus €40-63) The panorama is as every bit as sublime as the food at this refined Michelin-starred restaurant. Inventive specialties, such as gingerbread-encrusted scallops with chicory-arabica remoulade, are presented with flair and married with one of 800 wines. Reservations are essential.



Drinking

Les Deux Alpes has a well-deserved reputation for raucous après-ski parties. The resort's flurry of bars includes these two favourites:

Smokey Joe's

BAR

(www.smokeyjoes.fr; @) Live après-ski music, spicy Tex-Mex food and shot slamming are bound to get you grooving in your snow boots at this postslopes hangout at the base of Jandri gondola. There are guest DJs, big-screen sports and themed parties aplenty.

Smithy's

BAR

(www.smithystavern.com; 7 rue de Cairou) Vodka, fajitas and nachos, more vodka – that's the scene at this rocking chalet with a long

bar for lining 'em up. Smithy's hosts gigs, DJ nights and head-spinning parties.

Information

Maison des Deux Alpes (place des Deux Alpes) is the key source: inside you'll find the **tourist office** (04 76 79 22 00; www.les2alpes.com; 8am-7pm), **accommodation service** (04 76 79 24 38; www.les2alpesreservation.com), **ESF** (04 76 79 21 21; www.esf2alpes.com) and the **Bureau des Guides** (04 76 11 36 29; www.guides2alpes.com, in French).

Getting There & Away

Transisère buses link Grenoble and Les Deux Alpes (€5.50, 1¼ hours, up to 10 daily) via Bourg d'Oisans; return journeys to Grenoble must be booked 72 hours in advance in Les Deux Alpes at **Agence Transisère VFD** (112 av de la Muzelle). There are also services to/from Lyon St-Exupéry airport (one-way/return €32/48, 3½ hours).

ALPE D'HUEZ

ELEV 1860M

Number of hairpin bends: 21. Length: 14km. Average slope gradient: 7.9%. Record time: 37 minutes 35 seconds. Portrait of a mythical *étape* of the Tour de France between Bourg d'Oisans and Alpe d'Huez, a purpose-built resort in the Massif des Grandes Rousses.



Activities

Apart from legendary cycling, Alpe d'Huez has 245km of groomed pistes that range from dead easy to death-defying; at 16km the breathtakingly sheer **La Sarenne**, accessible from the Pic Blanc cable car, is Europe's longest black run. Experienced skiers can also ski in July and August on glaciers ranging from 2530m to 3330m. Speed is of the essence here and one look at the piste map confirms it's mighty black and hairy out there...

Pic du Lac Blanc (3330m), the highest point accessible year-round by the Tronçons and Pic Blanc **cable cars** (return €14.50; 9am-5pm Jul-Aug & Dec-Apr), commands magical views that reach across the rippling French Alps all the way to neighbouring Italy and Switzerland.

Summer unveils mountains threaded through with marked hiking and biking trails.



Sleeping & Eating

Le Printemps de Juliette

CHALET €€

(04 76 11 44 38; www.leprintempsdejuliette.com; av des Jeux; d €125-165; ) View the

world through rose-tinted specs at Juliette's very pretty, very *pink* chalet, where vintage teddies and dolls outnumber the guests. It's pastel and floral overload in the spotlessly clean rooms and the *salon de thé*, where you can sip tea and nibble homemade cakes by the fire.

Le Passe Montagne TRADITIONAL FRENCH €€

(☎04 76 11 31 53; rte de la Poste; mains €15-25) This stylish wooden chalet has service as smooth as its fondue Savoyarde. An open fire burns in the beamed dining room, the place for a tête-à-tête over a juicy rump steak with morels and Roquefort or oxtail in a rich Madeira wine sauce.

i Information

Information hub **Maison de l'Alpe** (place Paganon) sells ski passes and houses the helpful **tourist office** (☎04 76 11 44 44; www.alpedhuez.com; ☉9am-7pm), **accommodation reservation centre** (☎04 76 80 90 00; www.alpe-vacances.com) and **ESF** (☎04 76 80 31 69; www.esf-alpedhuez.com).

i Getting There & Away

Transisère buses link Alpe d'Huez and Grenoble (€5.50, 1¼ hours, up to 10 daily) via Bourg d'Oisans. In winter there is also a frequent ski bus that runs to and from Geneva Airport (€51, 2½ hours).

Briançon

POP 11,950 / ELEV 1320M

No matter whether you come by bus or car, it's a long, long way to Briançon, but it's worth every horn-tooting, head-spinning, glacier-gawping minute. The road from Grenoble is pure drama and not just because of the scenery; the locals adopt a nonchalant attitude to driving, the general consensus being: overtaking on hairpin bends, *pas de problème!* But brave it behind the wheel and you'll be richly rewarded with views of thundering falls, sheer cliffs and jagged peaks razoring above thick larch forests.

All of this is the drum roll to Briançon. Perched high on a hill and straight out of a fairy tale, the walled old town affords views of soaring Vauban fortifications and the snowcapped Écrins peaks on almost every corner. The centre's Italian look and feel is no coincidence – Italy is just another dizzying 20km away.



Sights



Vauban Fortifications FORTIFICATIONS

Briançon's biggest drawcard is its extensive 17th- and early-18th-century Vauban heritage, including the old town's signature star-shaped fortifications, surrounding forts (Fort des Têtes, Fort des Salettes, Fort du Dauphin and Fort du Randouillet) and bridge (Pont d'Asfeld). This architectural ensemble was listed as a Unesco World Heritage Site in 2008, a belated recognition of the pioneering genius of this engineer.

Vieille Ville HISTORIC QUARTER

Sitting astride a rocky outcrop and surrounded by mighty ramparts, Briançon's old town is a late-medieval time capsule, its winding cobbled lanes punctuated by shuttered town-houses in candy colours and shops selling won't-stop-whistling marmots.

The main street is the steep Grande Rue, also known as **Grande Gargouille** (Great Gargoyles) because of its gushing rivulet. It links the two main gates, **Porte de Pignerol** in the north, just off the Champ de Mars, and **Porte d'Embrun** lower down, at the top of av de la République. The coral-pink **Collégiale Notre Dame et St Nicolas** (place du Temple), another of Vauban's works, is worth a look for its baroque painting.

Fort du Château FORT

Crowning the old city is the slumbering Fort du Château, affording magnificent mountain views from its battlements. If you can't face the hike up, av Vauban along the town's northern ramparts affords equally spectacular views of the snowy Écrins peaks.



Activities

Serre Chevalier (www.serre-chevalier-ski.com) ski region, properly called Le Grand Serre Chevalier, links 13 villages and 250km of piste along the Serre Chevalier Valley between Briançon and Le Monétier-les-Bains, 15km northwest.

The tourist office hands out the excellent booklet *Guide des Itinéraires dans la Vallée de Serre Chevalier* (in French) detailing cultural walks and snowshoeing itineraries for those not so keen on skiing.

Télécabine du Prorel FUNICULAR

(av René Froger; day pass winter €41.50, adult/child return summer €11.50/9; ☉9am-5.30pm)

GREEN HIDEAWAY

Ringed by the majestic peaks of the Écrins National Park, hilltop **La Juliane** (☎04 92 23 47 49; www.lajuliane.com; Le Martouret, Pelvoux; dm/d €19/52, incl half board €40/91; ♿) is a sublime chalet built out of larch logs and dry stone. It is also a shining example of responsible tourism, with solar panels, a windmill, a micro-hydroelectric turbine and hemp insulation. Despite this rustic-sounding set-up, rooms are wonderfully cosy and owner Jean-Claude prepares delicious (mostly organic) food.

For energetic types, snowshoeing, skiing, hiking, climbing and mountain biking are available locally. Jean-Claude also runs wild-plant-picking and cooking courses in the spring.

La Juliane is 25km southwest of Briançon in Vallée de la Vallouise: from Pelvoux-le-Saret turn right on rte de l'Eychauda. Drive 500m up the hill until you reach a car park. From there, La Juliane is signposted up a small path. Jean-Claude can pick up luggage and young children by 4WD.

mid-Dec–Apr & Jul–Aug) It takes just a few minutes to reach the slopes from the Briançon-Serre Chevalier station at 1200m in Briançon's lower town.

École du Ski Français

SKIING

(☎04 92 20 30 57; www.esf-serrechevalier.com, in French; 7 av René Froger; ☀8.45am–6pm Dec–Apr) ESF runs a seasonal office inside the Prorel cable-car station.

Bureau des Guides et Accompagnateurs

OUTDOOR ACTIVITIES

(☎04 92 20 15 73; www.guides-briancon.fr, in French; Central Parc; ☀10.30am–noon & 4–7pm Jul–Aug, 4–7pm Sep–Jun) Organises the usual off-piste outings alongside treks, paragliding, rafting, cycling, canyoning and *via ferrate* in summer.

Maison du Parc

WALKS

(place du Médecin Général Blanchard; ☀2–6pm Mon–Fri) Nip in here for information and maps on walking in the nearby Écrins national park.

**Tours****Service du Patrimoine**

TOWN WALKS

(☎04 92 20 29 49; Porte de Pignerol; ☀9.30am–noon & 2–5.30pm Mon–Fri) Tucked in one of the old town's city gates, this organisation offers guided old-town walks (€5.50 in French, €6.50 in English, 1½ hours).

**Sleeping**

The tourist-office-run accommodation service, **Briançon Réservation** (☎04 92 21 01 01), can help you find a bed. Hotel parking in the pedestrian old town is a headache, so park along the ramparts and walk. Many places close in the shoulder seasons.

Auberge de la Paix

HISTORIC HOTEL €€

(☎04 92 21 37 43; www.auberge-de-la-paix.com; 3 rue Porte Méane; s €62–73, d €71–86, menus €26; ♿) Squirreled away in an old-town backstreet, this is Briançon's oldest hotel, dating from 1845. While the creaky wooden floors remain, the rooms have been totally revamped, the best flaunting groovy pebble bathtubs and flatscreen TVs. The kitsch mock-cave restaurant dishes up regional comfort food.

Hôtel de la Chaussée

TRADITIONAL HOTEL €

(☎04 92 21 10 37; www.hotel-de-la-chaussee.com; 4 rue Centrale; r €65–78) The Bonnafoux family has run this place with charm and efficiency since 1892. The renovated rooms fulfil every alpine chalet fantasy: wooden-clad, beautifully furnished, subtly scented and oh so cosy. The restaurant downstairs follows suit and serves a Vauban *menu*.

Auberge de Jeunesse Serre Chevalier

HOSTEL €

(☎04 92 24 74 54; www.fuaj.org, in French; Le Bez, Serre Chevalier 1400; dm incl breakfast €13.50; @) Eight kilometres northwest at Serre Chevalier-le-Bez, this hostel is right at the foot of the pistes. It's all very collective (big dorms, big canteen, big parties) and friendly. Take a bus heading to Monêtier-les-Bains, get off at Villeneuve Pré Long and walk 500m.

**Eating**

Briançon is milking the Vauban heritage in every possible way, and that includes eating. Five restaurants across town have agreed on a cartel of Vauban menus: no one is allowed to copy the others' recipes of 17th-

century fare (think pigeon, rabbit stews and never-heard-of legumes). The tourist office has a list of participating venues.

Le Valentin

REGIONAL CUISINE €€

(☎04 92 21 37 72; www.levantin.fr; 6 rue de la Mercerie; menus €17.50-32; ☺dinner Tue-Sun year-round, also lunch Jul–mid-Sep; 🍷) Séverine and Arnaud extend a heartfelt welcome at their softly lit cellar bistro. This is good old-fashioned home cooking along the lines of creamy *tartiflettes*, rosemary-infused lamb with *gratin dauphinois* and calorific desserts. There's a €8.50 kids' menu for *les petits*.

L'Étage

CRÊPES €

(☎04 92 23 09 22; 35 Grand Rue; crêpes €3.50-8) Your saving grace from the crowds on Grand Rue is this alpine-chic crêperie. Loosen your belt for sweet crêpes smothered in whipped cream, and savoury varieties like Normandy-style with Camembert, ham and potatoes.

Le Pied de la Gargouille

REGIONAL CUISINE €€

(☎04 92 20 12 95; 64 Grande Rue; menus €18.50-22; ☺dinner Wed-Sun) The Gargoyle's Foot is an old-town homage to fondue, *raclette* and *tartiflette*. Call ahead to reserve the speciality, *gigot d'agneau à la ficelle* (whole leg of lamb strung over an open fire), and bring three friends to finish it.



Information

The **tourist office** (☎04 92 21 08 50; www.ot-briancon.fr, in French; Maison des Templiers, 1 place du Temple; ☺9am-noon & 2-6pm Mon-Sat, 10.15am-12.15pm & 2.30-5pm Sun) can help book accommodation.



Getting There & Away

Grenoble-based **VFD** (www.vfd.fr, in French) runs at least one daily bus to/from Grenoble (€29, 2¾ hours) via Bourg d'Oisans. Tickets must be booked at least 72 hours in advance online.

Other services operated by **SCAL** (www.scal-amv-voyages.com, in French) and leaving from the bus stop on the corner of rue Général Co-laud include seven daily buses (except Sunday) to/from Gap (€10, two hours), Marseille (€31, five to six hours) and Aix-en-Provence (€28, five hours). Buses shuttle skiers and boarders to/from Villeneuve-la-Salle every 20 minutes (€4.60, 25 minutes). In winter **Satobus** (<http://satobus-alpes.altibus.com>) also runs services to/from Lyon St-Exupéry airport (€58, four

hours, two daily); book at least seven days in advance online.

Car & Motorcycle

The winding Col de Montgenèvre (1850m) mountain pass links Briançon with neighbouring Italy. It stays open year-round, as does the nearby Col du Lautaret (2058m) that links Briançon and Grenoble. Both do occasionally get snow-bogged.

Train

From the **train station** (av du Général de Gaulle), about 1.5km from the Vieille Ville, there are trains to Paris Gare de Lyon (€76, seven hours, five daily). Other destinations include Grenoble (€29, 4½ hours, six daily), Gap (€13, 1½ hours, seven daily) and Marseille (€39, 4½ hours, three daily).

THE JURA MOUNTAINS

The dark wooded hills, rolling dairy country and limestone plateaux of the Jura Mountains, stretching in an arc for 360km along the Franco-Swiss border from the Rhine to the Rhône, comprise one of the least explored pockets in France. Rural, deeply traditional and *un petit peu* eccentric, the Jura is the place, if it is serenity, authentic farmstays and a taste of mountain life you seek.

The Jura – from a Gaulish word meaning ‘forest’ – is France's premier cross-country skiing area. The range is dotted with ski stations and every year the region hosts the Transjurassienne, one of the world's toughest cross-country skiing events.

The region is not short of culture or history either. From heavy metallurgy to precious-gem cutting, its contribution hasn't gone unnoticed in the country's economy, neither has its historical role as the hotbed of the French Resistance during WWII.

Besançon

POP 121,850 / ELEV 262M

Home to a monumental Vauban citadel and France's first public museum, birthplace of Victor Hugo and the Lumière Brothers – Besançon has an extraordinary background and yet, remarkably, remains something of a secret. Straddling seven hills and hugging the banks of the River Doubs, the cultured capital of Franche-Comté remains refreshingly modest and



untouristy, despite charms such as its graceful 18th-century old town, first-rate restaurants and happening bars pepped up by the city's students.

It wasn't always that way. In Gallo-Roman times, Besançon was an important stop on the trade routes between Italy, the Alps and the Rhine. This role will come full circle in December 2011 when the new TGV station opens in the village of Auxon, 10km north of the centre. Once again, Besançon will be firmly back on the global map where it belongs.



Sights

Citadelle de Besançon

CITADEL

(www.citadelle.com; rue des Fusillés de la Résistance; adult/child €8/4.60; ☉9am-6pm) Besançon's crowning glory is this Unesco-listed, formidable feat of engineering, designed by the prolific Vauban for Louis XIV in the late 17th century. Dominating a hill-top and dramatically lit by night, the citadel commands sweeping views of the city's mosaic of red rooftops and the serpentine River Doubs.

The citadel harbours a trio of museums: the **Musée Comtois** zooms in on local tra-

Besançon

Top Sights

Citadelle de Besançon.....	D5
Musée des Beaux-Arts	B2
Parc Micaud	D1

Sights

Cathédrale St-Jean	(see 1)
1 Horloge Astronomique.....	D4
2 House of the Lumière Brothers.....	C4
3 House of Victor Hugo	C4
4 Musée Comtois.....	D5
Musée de la Résistance et de la	
Déportation	(see 4)
Musée d'Histoire Naturelle.....	(see 4)
5 Porte Noire.....	D4

Activities, Courses & Tours

6 Bateaux du Saut du Doubs.....	D2
7 Vedettes de Besançon	C1

Sleeping

8 Charles Quint Hôtel	D4
9 Hôtel de Paris	C2
10 Hôtel du Nord.....	C3
11 Hôtel Granvelle	C5
12 Maison de Verre	C3

Eating

Brasserie du Commerce.....	(see 9)
13 Indoor Market	B2
14 La Table des Halles.....	C2
15 Mi:AM	C2
16 Mirabelle.....	B3
17 Monoprix.....	B2
18 Outdoor Market	B2
19 Pum	B2

Drinking

20 Bar de l'U.....	C4
21 Carpe Diem	D4
22 Le Gibus.....	B2
23 Les Passagers du Zinc	A2

ditions, the **Musée d'Histoire Naturelle** covers natural history, and the harrowing **Musée de la Résistance et de la Déportation** takes an in-depth look at the rise of Nazism and fascism, and the French Resistance movement. The latter is unsuitable for young children.

To boost the citadel's family appeal, there's an **insectarium** (home to some meaty tarantulas), an **aquarium**, a pitch-black, ho-hum **noctarium** and an overly cramped **parc zoologique**. Citadel admission covers entry to all museums and attractions.



Musée des Beaux-Arts

GALLERY, MUSEUM

(Fine Arts Museum; www.musee-arts-besancon.org, in French; 1 place de la Révolution; adult/child €5/free; ☎9.30am-noon & 2-6pm Wed-Mon) No trip to Besançon is complete without visiting this stately museum. It is France's oldest, founded in 1694 when the Louvre was but a twinkle in Paris' eye. The stellar collection spans archaeology with its Egyptian mummies, Neolithic tools and Gallo-Roman mosaics; a cavernous drawing cabinet with 5500 works including Dürer, Delacroix and Rodin masterpieces; and 14th- to 20th-century painting with standouts by Titian, Rubens, Goya and Matisse.

Parc Micaud

PARK

(av Edouard Droz) For that must-have snapshot of the hilltop citadel with the swiftly flowing Doubs in the foreground, take a stroll along this leafy riverside promenade, a great spot for a picnic with a view. A carousel, playground and donkey rides keep kids entertained.

Horloge Astronomique

ASTRONOMICAL CLOCK

(rue de la Convention; adult/child €3/free; ☎7 guided tours Wed-Mon) Housed in the 18th-century **Cathédrale St-Jean**, this incredible astronomical clock has 30,000 moving parts, 57 faces, 62 dials and, among other things, tells the time in 16 places around the world, the tides in eight different ports of France, and the time of the local sunrise and sunset.

Porte Noire

ROMAN ARCH

(Black Gate; rue de la Convention) A steep 15-minute downhill walk from the citadel, the Porte Noire is a triumphal arch left over from the city's Roman days, dating from the 2nd century AD.



Tours

When the sun's out, a river cruise is a relaxed way to see Besançon. From April to October, vessels dock beneath Pont de la République to take passengers on 1¼-hour cruises along the River Doubs. Both these companies sail along a 375m-long tunnel underneath the citadel:

Bateaux du Saut du Doubs (www.sautdu-doubs.fr, in French; adult/child €10.50/8)

Vedettes de Besançon (www.vedettesdesbesancon.com, in French; adult/child €10.50/8).



VISI'PASS

Besançon's top sights and museums, including the citadel and the Musée des Beaux-Arts, can be visited with a good-value **Visi'Pass** (adult/child €8/4.10). You can buy it directly at the sights, online or from the tourist office.



Festivals & Events

Festival de Musique Besançon

MUSIC FESTIVAL

(www.festival-besancon.com) Classical music of the highest calibre resounds in Besançon's historic buildings in September.

Marché de Noël

CHRISTMAS MARKET

In December get into the festive spirit with twinkling carousels, carols and *vin chaud* in the old town.



Sleeping

Charles Quint Hôtel

HISTORIC HOTEL €€

(03 81 82 05 49; www.hotel-charlesquint.com; 3 rue du Chapitre; d €89-145; @) This discreetly grand 18th-century town house turned nine-room boutique hotel is sublime, with period furniture, sumptuous fabrics, a garden with a tiny swimming pool and a wood-panelled dining room. Find it slumbering in the shade of the citadel, behind the cathedral.

Maison de Verre

B&B €€

(03 81 81 82 27; http://lamaisondeverre.com, in French; 26 rue Bersot; s/d €75/85, menu €35; @) Katherine Bermond has cleverly converted a car factory into this nouveau-chic *chambre d'hôte* with an industrial twist. Clean lines, sculpted furniture and muted colours define the design-oriented rooms and dining room. The food served is inspired by seasonal, locally sourced produce.

Hôtel de Paris

DESIGN HOTEL €€

(03 81 81 36 56; www.besanconhoteldeparis.com; 33 rue des Granges; s €60, d €75-105; @) Hidden down a side street in the old town, this former 18th-century coaching inn reveals a razor-sharp eye for design. Corridors lit by leaded windows lead to slinky, silver-kissed rooms, a small fitness room and a shady inner courtyard.

Hôtel du Nord

HOTEL €

(03 81 81 34 56; www.hotel-du-nord-besancon.com; 8 rue Moncey; d €42-67, q €63-83; @) Right in the centre of town, this good-value family pick has spacious and comfortable (if dated) rooms. Free parking is a bonus.

Hôtel Granvelle

TRADITIONAL HOTEL €

(03 81 81 33 92; www.hotel-granvelle.fr; 13 rue Lecourbe; s €52-62, d €55-68; @) You'll find 30 neat and tidy rooms in this stone building at the back of a courtyard below the citadel. 'Interactive' rooms are equipped with internet-linked computers and flatscreen TVs. Good wheelchair access.



Eating



Le Saint-Pierre

MODERN FRENCH €€

(03 81 81 20 99; www.restaurant-saintpierre.com, in French; 104 rue Battant; menus €35-60; @ lunch Mon-Fri, dinner Mon-Sat) This arty restaurant has swiftly become one of Besançon's most coveted. Crisp white linen, exposed stone and subtle lighting are the backdrop for intense flavours, such as lobster fricassee with spinach and herb ravioli, which are expertly paired with regional wines. The three-course *menu marché* including wine and coffee is a steal at €35. The restaurant is 500m (a five-minute walk) north of Grand Rue on the opposite side of the river.

La Table des Halles

MODERN FRENCH €€

(03 81 50 62 74; 22 rue Gustave Courbet; menus €15-29; @ Tue-Sat) The urban loft decor at this fashionable restaurant wouldn't look out of place in New York's Meatpacking District. But what lands on your plate is resolutely French and regional: Lake Geneva fish, fillet of beef with truffle jus, foie gras crumble with tart apple compote. Fabulous.



Mirabelle

CAFÉ €€

(03 81 81 40 56; 5 rue Mégevand; mains €11-14; @ lunch Mon-Fri, dinner Mon-Sat; @) Bird boxes dangle from the ceiling and the cheese menu is chalked on a mouse-shaped blackboard at this kinda kitsch, kinda cool café. A boho crowd flocks here for gratins, *croûtes* and scrummy tarts made with seasonal, mostly organic ingredients.

Brasserie du Commerce

BRASSERIE €€

(03 81 81 33 11; 31 rue Granges; mains €14-18) Stucco ceilings, gilt mirrors and opulent chandeliers catapult you back to the more glamorous age of belle époque at this buzzy

brasserie, rustling up classic fare from fresh fish to beef carpaccio.

MI:AM

BISTRO €€

(☎03 81 82 09 56; 8 rue Morand; mains €15; ☺Tue-Sun) Upside-down Christmas trees (in midsummer) and popcorn-filled baubles give trendy MI:AM (as in YUM!) quirk factor. Waltz through the heavy velvet curtain or snag a seat on the street terrace for an *apéro dînatoire* (light casual dinner) or an appetising lunchtime *tartine*.

Pum

THAI €

(☎03 81 81 18 47; 1 rue Jean Petit; mains €6.50-7.50; ☺) Bright-orange Pum is a great place for tight budgets. Take a seat wherever there's space at one of the long wooden tables. Thai staples such as stir-fries and green curries feature prominently. Upstairs, the bar serves cocktails with an Thai twist.

Self-Catering

Self-caterers can bag picnic fixings at the **indoor market** (rue Claude Goudimel; ☺Tue-Sun morning) and the **outdoor market** (place de la Révolution; ☺Tue & Fri morning) or the supermarket, **Monoprix** (10 Grande Rue).



Drinking

Students spice up the nightlife in Besançon, concentrated in the old Battant quarter and along the river. With wall-to-wall drinking

holes, lively rue Claude Pouillet is a street made for bar-crawling.

Les Passagers du Zinc

BAR

(5 rue Vignier; ☺closed Mon) A grungy bar-cum-club with battered leather sofas and multicoloured lights, the regular live bands and music nights keep this place high on the list of best venues in town. Step through the bonnet of an old Citroën DS to reach the cellar.

Bar de l'U

BAR

(5 rue Mairet; ☺8am-1am Mon-Fri, 11am-2am Sat, 6pm-midnight Sun; ☺) With live music most nights and slamming competitions every second Monday of the month, this is a student mainstay. To attend many events, you'll need a student card.

Le Gibus

BAR

(11 rue Claude Pouillet) A rocking crowd gathers in the 1950s pin-up decor most evenings for live or recorded music and always plenty of good times.

Carpe Diem

CAFÉ

(2 place Jean Gignoux; ☺9am-1am or 2am Mon-Sat, 9am-8pm Sun) An exemplary French café with a crowd of regulars, on the respectable side of 60 during the day and the carefree side of 30 at night. Regular gigs feature.

i Information

ID PC (28 rue de la République; internet per hr €3; ☺Tue-Sat) Computer shop with internet terminals.

Post office (23 rue Proudhon) In the old town.

Tourist office (☎03 81 80 92 55; www.besancon-tourisme.com; Hôtel de Ville, place du 8 Septembre; ☺10am-6pm Mon-Sat, to 1pm Sun) Sells city maps and guides; organises thematic city tours (in French only).

i Getting There & Around

BICYCLE Borrow a bicycle to cruise around town – free with a valid bus ticket – from the local bus company office, **Boutique Ginko** (www.ginkobus.com; 4 place du 8 Septembre). The boutique sells bus tickets costing €1.20/3.60/10 for a single ticket/day ticket/carnet of 10.

BUS There is no bus station in Besançon. Daily services to Orans (€3, 45 minutes) and Pontarlier (€6, 1¼ hours) stop at the train-station bus stop. You can buy tickets at the **Boutique Mobilignes** (www.mobilignes.com), at the far end of the Besançon Gare Viotte train station.

DON'T MISS

LIGHTS, CAMERA, HUGO

Victor Hugo, an influential national and political figure and one of France's literary treasures, famous for penning masterpieces such as *Les Misérables* and *Notre-Dame de Paris* (The Hunchback of Notre Dame), was born in 1802 in Besançon. The **House of Victor Hugo** (140 Grand Rue) is identified by a commemorative inscription. Close by on the same street, look out for the plaque marking the **House of the Lumière Brothers**. Born here in 1862 and 1864 respectively, the aptly named Auguste and Louis Lumière (*lumière* means 'light') were among the earliest pioneers of cinema and staged their first screening of motion pictures in 1895.

JURASSIEN HIDEOUTS

Escape civilisation at these more-idyllic-than-idyllic retreats. Advance reservations are essential.

Swiss-run **Amondans** (☎03 81 86 53 53; www.amondans.com, in French; place du Village, Amondans; s/d/tr incl half board €73/106/147; ☀May-Oct) is an 18th-century farm, 30km south of Besançon in sleepy Amondans, fusing retro-chic furnishings with centuries-old features. The vast, minimal rooms overlook open fields. Guests are hip, happy, outdoor types who hang out after dinner by an enormous fireplace in a converted barn. Swiss owners George and Geneviève can arrange picnics and all kinds of activities.

Ferme Auberge du Rondeau (☎03 81 59 25 84; <http://sebou25.free.fr>, in French; Lavans-Vuillafans; s/d €42/53, menus €24-35; ☀mid-Jan-mid-Dec; 🏠) is 33km south of Besançon off the N57. Coo over goats, boar and dairy cows at this organic farm where the friendly Boudiers keep the snug wood-panelled rooms immaculate and rustle up a fantastic breakfast with homemade yoghurt, jam and fresh-baked bread. Fresh farm specialities like goat's cheese and *sanglier saucisson* (boar sausage) with home-grown veg are served at lunch and dinner. They also sell fleecy mohair jumpers hand-knitted from the wool of their angora goats.

TRAIN From Besançon Gare Viotte, 800m uphill from the city centre, trains run to/from Paris (€41, 2¾ hours, 26 daily), Dijon (€14, 70 minutes, 20 daily), Lyon (€28, 3½ hours, 25 daily), Belfort (€15, 1¼ hours, 20 daily), Arbois (€8.50, 45 minutes, 10 daily) and Arc-et-Senans (€6.50, 30 minutes, 10 daily). Buy tickets at the train station or from the **Boutique SNCF** (44 Grande Rue) in town.

Around Besançon

SALINE ROYALE

Envisaged by its designer, Claude-Nicolas Ledoux, as the 'ideal city', the 18th-century **Saline Royale** (Royal Saltworks; www.saline-royale.com, in French; adult/child €7.50/3.50; ☀9am-noon & 2-6pm) in Arc-et-Senans, 35km southwest of Besançon, is a showpiece of early Industrial Age town planning. Although his urban dream was never fully realised, Ledoux's semicircular saltworks is now listed as a Unesco World Heritage Site.

Regular trains link Besançon and Arc-et-Senans (€6.50, 30 minutes, 10 daily).

ROUTE PASTEUR

Almost every single town in France has at least one street, square or garden named after Louis Pasteur, the great 19th-century chemist who invented pasteurisation and developed the first rabies vaccine. In the Jura it is even more the case, since the illustrious man was a local lad.

Pasteur was born in the well-preserved medieval town of **Dole**, former capital of Franche-Comté, 20km west of Arc-et-Senans along the D472. A scenic stroll along the Canal des Tanneurs in the historic tanner's quarter brings you to his childhood home, **La Maison Natale de Pasteur** (www.musee-pasteur.com; 43 rue Pasteur; adult/child €5/free; ☀10am-noon & 2-6pm Mon-Sat, 2-6pm Sun), now an atmospheric museum housing exhibits including his cot, first drawings and university cap and gown.

In 1827 the Pasteur family settled in the bucolic village of **Arbois** (population 3480), 35km east of Dole. His laboratory and workshops here are on display at **La Maison de Louis Pasteur** (83 rue de Courcelles; adult/child €5.50/2.80; ☀guided tours hourly 9.45-11.45am & 2-6pm). The house is still decorated with its original 19th-century fixtures and fittings.

ROUTE DES VINS DE JURA

The **Route des Vins de Jura** (Jura Wine Road; www.laroutedesvinsdujura.com) corkscrews through some 80km of well-tended vines, pretty countryside and stone villages. Plan your route by downloading the winery guide and map from the website.

No visit to Arbois, the Jura wine capital, would be complete without a glass of *vin jaune*. The history of this nutty 'yellow wine' is told in the **Musée de la Vigne et du Vin** (adult/child €3.50/2.70; ☀10am-noon & 2-6pm Wed-Mon), housed in the whimsical,

turreted Château Pécauld. The 2.5km-long **Chemin des Vignes** walking trail and the 8km-long **Circuit des Vignes** mountain-bike route meander through the vines. Both trails (marked with orange signs) begin at the top of the steps next to the Château Pécauld in Arbois; a booklet with more information is available at the tourist office.



La Balance Mets et Vins (☎03 84

37 45 00; 47 rue de Courcelles; menus €23-55; ☺lunch & dinner Thu-Mon, lunch Tue; 🍷), with its lunches favouring local, organic produce, provides the perfect coda to a wine-loving trip. Its signature *coq au vin jaune et aux morilles* casserole and crême brûlée doused in *vin jaune* are must-tastes, as are the wine menus with five glasses of either Jurassienne wine (€15) or *vin jaune* (€25, including a vintage one). Kids can sniff, swirl and sip, too, with three kinds of organic grape juice (€7.50).

High above Arbois is tiny **Pupillin**, a cute yellow-brick village famous for its wine production. Some 10 different *caves* (wine cellars) are open to visitors.

Arbois **tourist office** (☎03 84 66 55 50; www.arbois.com; 17 rue de l'Hôtel de Ville; ☺9am-noon & 2-6pm Mon-Sat) has walking and cycling information and a list of *caves* where you can taste and buy the local vintage.

Trains link Arbois and Besançon (€8.50, 45 minutes, 10 daily).

Poligny to Région des Lacs

Comté is indisputable king of the Jura, small-town **Poligny** (population 4600) serving as the capital of the industry that produces 40 million tonnes of the venerable cheese a year. Learn how 450L is transformed into a 40kg wheel of the tangy cheese, smell some of its 83 different aromas, and have a nibble at the **Maison du Comté** (www.comte.com; av de la Résistance; adult/child €4/2.50; ☺guided tours 2.30pm, 3.30pm & 4.40pm Tue-Sun). There are dozens of *fruitières* (cheese cooperatives) open to the public. Poligny **tourist office** (☎03 84 37 24 21; place des Déportés; ☺9am-noon & 2-6pm Mon-Fri, 9am-5pm Sat) stocks an abundance of cheese info.

Heading south, wiggle along the pretty D68 to Plasne, then continue south to **Château-Chalon**, a medieval village of yellow stone surrounded by vineyards known for their legendary *vin jaune*. There is a helpful **tourist office** (☎04 84 44 62 47; www.hauteseille.com; 3 place de la Mairie; ☺9.30am-12.30pm & 2-6pm Mon-Fri) in the nearby village of Voiteur, with plenty of info and maps on surrounding villages, wine and walking in the area.

Nestled at the foot of lushly wooded limestone cliffs and wedged between three glacial valleys, 20km south of Poligny, is **Baume-les-Messieurs**, a picturesque village of honey-coloured cob houses and red-tiled rooftops. Its abandoned Benedictine

LIQUID GOLD

Legend has it that *vin jaune* (yellow wine) was invented when a winemaker found a forgotten barrel, six years and three months after he'd initially filled it, and discovered its content miraculously transformed into a gold-coloured wine (hence the name).

A long, undisrupted fermentation process gives Jura's signature wine its unique characteristics. Savagnin grapes are harvested late and their sugar-saturated juices left to ferment for a minimum of six years and three months in oak barrels. A thin layer of yeast forms over the wine, which prevents it oxidising, and there are no top-ups to compensate for evaporation (called *la part des anges*, 'the angels' share'). In the end, 100L of grape juice ferments down to 62L of *vin jaune* (lucky angels), which is then bottled in special 0.62L bottles called *clavelin*. *Vin jaune* is actually renowned for its ageing qualities, with prime vintages easily keeping for more than a century. The oldest bottle was a 1774 vintage, a cool 220 years old when sipped by an awestruck committee of experts in 1994.

La Percée du Vin Jaune (www.percee-du-vin-jaune.com) festival takes place annually in early February to celebrate the first tasting of the vintage produced six years and three months earlier. Villages take it in turn to hold the two-day celebrations at which the new vintage is blessed and rated, and street tastings, cooking competitions, cellar visits and auctions keep *vin jaune* aficionados fulfilled.

Abbaye Impériale (Imperial Abbey; adult/child €4.50/2.50; ☺ guided tours 10am-noon & 2-6pm mid-May-Sep) has an exquisite polychrome Flemish altarpiece dating from the 16th century. Nearby, the 30-million-year-old **Grottes de Baume** (Baume Caves; adult/child €5.50/3; ☺ guided tours 10am-5pm Apr-Sep) feature some impressive stalagmites and stalactites.

Immediately east lies Jura's **Région des Lacs** (Lakes District), a region of wild, lonely heights, dark forests, cave-riddled limestone cliffs and gemstone lakes. This family-oriented region is perfect for low-key outdoor pursuits like hiking, fishing and horse riding. You can take in the enchanting **Cascades du Hérisson** waterfalls, including the wispy 65m-high Cascade de l'Éventail, on a walk along the 7km waterfall trail. For details on sights, activities and events, visit www.juralacs.com.

Sleeping & Eating

In rural areas, most restaurants close on week nights from November to April. The region is sprinkled with atmospheric *chambres d'hôte* and farmstays, but you'll need your own set of wheels.



Escargot Comtois

B&B €

(☎ 03 84 24 15 29; www.escargot-comtois.com; 215 rue de Montorient, Courbouzon; s/d/tr/q €48/55/65/80; ☺☺) An ode to zee 'umble escargot, Muriel and David Blanchard's carefully restored 1747 stone village house is also one of France's 400 snail farms. The grass-binging activity of the 200,000 gastropods peaks between May and September. The wood-floored rooms are bright and spacious, and there's a sandpit and swings for the kids in the garden. Try the escargots, oozing garlic-herb butter, with a glass of local wine in the dining room. Courbouzon is 16km south of Baume-les-Messieurs.

Hôtel de la Vallée Heureuse

HOTEL €€

(☎ 03 84 37 12 13; www.hotelvalleeheureuse.com; rte de Genève, Poligny; d €90-120, menus €28-65; ☺☺) You will indeed be *heureuse* (happy) to stumble across this beautifully converted 18th-century mill, which sits in riverside parkland and affords gorgeous forest and mountain views. The country retreat has tastefully decorated rooms and a restaurant specialising in Jurassien cuisine, plus a mini spa, and indoor and outdoor pools.



Au Douillet Gourmet

FARMSTAY €

(☎ 03 84 51 27 24; www.au-douillet-gourmet.com; rue du Château, Montigny-sur-l'Ain; s/d/tr/q incl breakfast €40/52/63/78, incl half board €57/86/108/148; ☺) If you stay at Pascal and Christelle's welcoming dairy farm, you can learn and even help with milking the cows, bottle-feeding the calves or collecting eggs from the hen hutch. Christelle also does wonderful homemade food and pretty much everything you'll eat comes from the farm. The farm is 16km east of Baume-les-Messieurs and on the northern edge of the Jura lake district.

Le Relais des Abbesses

B&B €€

(☎ 03 84 44 98 56; www.chambres-hotes-jura.com; rue de la Roche, Château-Chalon; d €72, dinners €25) At this turreted *chambre d'hôte* in hilltop Château-Chalon, Agnès and Gérard have attractively decorated the rooms with hardwood floors, romantic canopy beds and Asian antiques. They are both fine cooks and dinner is an absolute treat, whether it's in the elegant dining room or on the terrace overlooking the countryside.

Le Grand Jardin

B&B €

(☎ 03 84 44 68 37; www.legrandjardin.fr, in French; rue des Grands Jardins, Baume-les-Messieurs; s/d/tr/q €42/52/63/75, 3-course menus €13.50) Book well ahead in summer to snag one of the three sunny rooms at this delightful *chambre d'hôte*, opposite the abbey in Baume-les-Messieurs. Local cheese, charcuterie and trout appear on the restaurant's appetising menu.

Café Restaurant de l'Abbaye

JURASSIEN CUISINE €

(☎ 03 84 44 63 44; place Guillaume de Poupet, Baumes-les-Messieurs; menus €21; ☺ lunch daily, dinner Fri, Sat, daily mid-Jun-Sep) Tucked in one of the abbey's old buildings, this stone-walled café-restaurant rolls out a feast of regional fare. Try the *vin jaune* terrine or trout fillet in savagnin wine for a real taste of the Jura.

Belfort

POP 51,350

Squeezed between north and east, France and Germany, art and industry, Belfort has grown into its own distinctive identity (it calls itself a *territoire*, not a *département*). Historically part of Alsace, it only became part of the Franche-Comté region in 1921

HOT BOX, CHRISTMAS ICE & JESUS

It's hot, it's soft and it's packed in a box. Vacherin Mont d'Or is the only French cheese to be eaten with a spoon – hot. Made between 15 August and 15 March with *lait cru* (unpasteurised milk), it derives its unique nutty taste from the spruce bark in which it's wrapped. Connoisseurs top the soft-crust cheese with chopped onions, garlic and white wine, wrap it in aluminium foil and bake it for 45 minutes to create a *boîte chaude* (hot box). Only 11 factories in the Jura are licensed to produce Vacherin Mont d'Or.

Mouthe, 15km south of Métabief Mont d'Or, is the mother of *liqueur de sapin* (fir-tree liqueur). *Glace de sapin* (fir-tree ice cream) also comes from Mont d'Or, known as the North Pole of France due to its seasonal subzero temperatures (record low: -38°C). Sampling either is rather like ingesting a Christmas tree. Then there's *Jésus* – a small, fat version of *saucisse de Morteau* (Morteau sausage), easily identified by the wooden peg on its end, attached after the sausage is smoked with pinewood sawdust in a traditional *tuyé* (mountain hut).

and is best known today as the manufacturer of the superspeedy TGV train.

Sights & Activities

Citadelle de Belfort

CITADEL

(adult/child €7/5.50; ☉10am-6pm Wed-Mon May-Oct) Slung high above the old town, this sturdy citadel, built by the prolific Vauban, is the city's centrepiece. Inside is the **Musée d'Histoire**, which spells out regional history in artefacts. The citadel stages open-air concerts in summer.

On duty at its foot is a regal 22m-tall lion sculpted in red sandstone by Frédéric-Auguste Bartholdi (of *Statue of Liberty* fame) to commemorate Belfort's resistance to the Prussians in 1870–71. While the rest of Alsace was annexed as part of the greater German Empire, Belfort stubbornly remained part of France.

Musée de l'Aventure Peugeot

CAR MUSEUM

(www.musee-peugeot.com; Carrefour de l'Europe; adult/child €7/3.50; ☉10am-6pm) Gleaming old-timers, concept cars and thumb-sized miniatures – it's Peugeots à gogo at this museum, 12km south of Belfort in Sochaux.

Église du Sacré Cœur

CHURCH

(Carrer del Palau Reial 27; adult/child €3.50/2.50; ☉10am-6pm Tue-Sun) This modernist church, 4km southeast in Audincourt, is an architecture-buff must.



Festivals & Events

Les Eurockéennes

MUSIC FESTIVAL

(www.eurockeenes.fr, in French) Belfort plays host to three-day open-air rock festival in July.

Entre Vues

FILM FESTIVAL

(www.festival-entrevues.com) International film festival in late November.



Sleeping & Eating

Don't leave Belfort without biting into a *Belflore*, a scrumptious almond-flavoured pastry filled with raspberries and topped with hazelnuts.

Grand Hôtel du Tonneau d'Or

HISTORIC HOTEL €€

(☎03 84 58 57 56; www.tonneaudor.fr; 1 rue Reiset; d/tr €139/154; ☎☎) All stucco, sweeping staircases and art nouveau stained glass, this is a grand hotel with a modest price tag. The large rooms are more modern than the lobby suggests, with creature comforts like minibars and free wi-fi. Rates drop 40% at weekends.

Relais d'Alsace

SMALL HOTEL €

(☎03 84 22 15 55; www.arahotel.com; 5 av de la Laurencie; s €40-60, d €60-70; ☎) The bright, no-frills rooms are spick and span at this good-value guesthouse, on a main road slightly north of the centre. Breakfast is worth the extra €7.



Information

Tourist office (☎03 84 55 90 90; www.ot-belfort.fr; 2bis rue Clémenceau; ☉9am-12.30pm & 2-6.30pm Mon-Sat) Distributes free city maps and has information on accommodation and activities.



Getting There & Away

Connections from Belfort **train station** (av Wilson) include Paris Gare de Lyon via Besançon (€62, four hours, 10 daily), Montbéliard (€3.60,

GRANDE TRAVERSÉE DU JURA

Cross-country skiing, mountain biking, walking and snowshoeing, the Grande Traversée du Jura (Grand Jura Crossing; GTJ) cross-country track runs some 200km from Villers-le-Lac (north of Pontarlier) to Hauteville-Lompnes (southwest of Bellegarde). The exact itinerary varies between disciplines but the track peaks at 1500m near the town of Mouthe (south of Métabief) and follows one of France's coldest valleys. To cover the popular, well-groomed track takes 10 days of skiing – a feat even for the ultrafit.

The 76km stretch of the GTJ from Lamoura to Mouthe lures 4000 skiers to the world's second-largest cross-country ski race in February, the **Transjurassienne** (www.transjurassienne.com), and hundreds of inline skaters to **Trans' Roller** (www.transroller.com) in September.

For the GTJ lowdown, including maps and accommodation details, visit www.gtj.asso.fr.

15 minutes, 20 daily) and Besançon (€15, 1¼ hours, 14 daily).

Ronchamp

The only reason to rendezvous in Ronchamp, 20km west of Belfort, is to visit Le Corbusier's striking modernist chapel on a hill overlooking the old mining town. Built between 1950 and 1955, the surreal **Chapelle de Notre Dame du Haut** (Chapel of Our Lady of the Height; www.chapellederonchamp.fr, in French; adult/child €5/3; ☉9.30am–7pm), with a sweeping concrete roof, dazzling stained-glass windows and plastic features, is one of the 20th century's architectural masterpieces.

A 15-minute walking trail leads uphill to the chapel from the centre of Ronchamp village; the **tourist office** (☎03 84 63 50 82; 14 place du 14 Juillet; ☉9am–12.30pm & 1.30–6pm Tue–Fri, 9am–12.30pm Sat, 1.30–6pm Mon) can guide you.

Trains run from Ronchamp to Belfort (€4.30, 20 minutes, six daily).

Métabief

POP 890 / ELEV 1000M

Métabief, 18km south of Pontarlier on the main road to Lausanne, is the region's leading cross-country ski resort. Year-round lifts take you almost to the top of Mont d'Or (1463m), the highest peak, from where a fantastic 180-degree panorama stretches over the foggy Swiss plain to Lake Geneva (Lac Léman) and all the way from the Matterhorn to Mont Blanc.

Métabief is famed for its unique Vacherin Mont d'Or cheese, which has been produced alongside Comté and Morbier by the Sancey-Richard family at the **Fromagerie du Mont d'Or** (www.fromageriedumontdor.com, in French; 2 rue Moulin; ☉9am–12.15pm & 3–7pm Mon–Sat, 9am–noon Sun) since 1953. To see it being made, arrive with the milk lorry around 9am.

The closest **tourist office** (☎03 81 49 13 81; www.tourisme-metabief.com, in French; 1 place de la Mairie, Les Hôpitaux-Neufs; ☉9am–12.30pm & 1.30–6pm Mon–Fri) open year-round is in Les Hôpitaux-Neufs, 2.5km northeast of Métabief. The annexe in Métabief is closed October and November; April and May, much like everything else in the village.

Family-run **Hôtel Étoile des Neiges** (☎03 81 49 11 21; www.hoteletoiledesneiges.fr, in French; 4 rue du Village; s/d/tr/q €54/66/80/94, with half board €70/100/138/168; ☉☎) has bright, well-kept rooms, including great mezzanine family rooms. There's an indoor pool and canteen-style restaurant.

You'll need a car to reach Métabief, along the D9 (just off the N57), 58km east of Arbois and 75km south of Besançon.

Around Métabief Mont d'Or

The closest you'll get to the North Pole in these parts is the Christmassy **Parc Polaire** (www.parcpolaire.com, in French; adult/child €7.50/5.50; ☉10am–noon & 2–5pm, closed Mon, Sat morning, Nov) in Chaux-Neuve, where Claude and Gilles Malloire will introduce you to huskies, reindeer and some mighty hairy yaks on a 1½-hour guided tour.

A real cliff-hanger of a castle, the medieval **Château de Joux** (www.chateaudejoux.com, in French; adult/child €6/3.20; ☞ guided tours 10-11.30am & 2-4.30pm Apr-mid-Nov), 10km north of Métabief, used to guard the route between Switzerland and France. Today it houses France's most impressive arms museum, and a 100m-deep well. Guided tours are gripping, full of anecdotes and stories, and available in English (ring ahead). In summer, torch-lit night-time tours are organised for extra spookiness.

Parc Naturel Régional du Haut-Jura

Experience the Jura at its rawest in the Haut-Jura Regional Park, an area of 757 sq km stretching from Chapelle-des-Bois in the north almost to the western tip of Lake Geneva. Forget about exploring the region's lakes, mountains and low-lying valleys without a car.

A great place to start is the **Maison du Parc** (www.parc-haut-jura.fr; Lajoux; adult/child €5/3; ☞ 10am-12.30pm & 2-6.30pm Tue-Fri, 2-6.30pm Sat & Sun), a visitor centre with an interactive sensorial museum that explores the region and its history through sound, touch and smell. The Maison du Parc is in the east of the Haut-Jura Regional Park, 19km east of St-Claude and 5km west of Mijoux on the Swiss border.

There's not much to **St-Claude** – the largest town in the park – bar its illustrious diamond-cutting industry which, unfortunately, is off limits to visitors.



Les Louvières (☞ 03 84 42 09 24; www.leslouvieres.com, in French; Pratz;

2-/3-course menus €32/38; ☞ lunch & dinner Wed-Sat, lunch Sun), a solar-powered mountain farmhouse restaurant to rave about, is a 20-minute drive west in Pratz. Philippe's cuisine (foie gras maki-zushi with maple syrup, fish in wasabi sauce etc) is strictly fusion.



Le Clos d'Estelle (☞ 03 84 42 01 29; www.leclosdestelle.com; Hameau La

Marcantine, Charchilla; d €64-82, q €120), 12km north, has four *chambres d'hôte* where you can fall asleep to pin-drop silence. It's run by the lovely Christine and Jean-Pierre Thévenet, Jura locals through and through, who'll enthusiastically share their knowledge of the area with you.

Les Rousses, on the northeastern edge of the park, is the park's prime sports hub,

winter (skiing) and summer (walking and mountain biking) alike. The resort comprises four small, predominantly cross-country ski areas: Prémanon, Lamoura, Bois d'Amont and the village Les Rousses. Find out more at the **Maison du Tourisme** (Fort des Rousses; ☞ 9am-noon & 2-6pm Mon-Sat, 9.30am-12.30pm Sun), home to the **tourist office** (☞ 03 84 60 02 55; www.lesrousses.com, in French) and the **ESF** (☞ 03 84 60 01 61; www.esf-lesrousses.com). You can eat and/or stay the night on the Swiss border at Hôtel Franco-Suisse (below).

The far-reaching vista from the **Col de la Faucille** mountain pass, 20km south of Les Rousses, reaches across the Jura Mountains to Lake Geneva and the snow-dusted Alps. Savour these incredible views (extra incredible at sunset) from the restaurant terrace, or the poolside in summer, of **La Mainaz** (☞ 04 50 41 31 10; www.la-mainaz.com; 5 rte du Col de la Faucille; d €80-120, menus €32-43; ☞ mid-Dec-mid-Oct; ☞), a cosy chalet midway along the mountain pass.

As the N5 wriggles down the Jura Mountains past the small ski resort of **Mijoux**, the panorama of Lake Geneva embraced by the French Alps and Mont Blanc beyond is stunning. For the best views, ride the **Télésiège Val Mijoux** (chairlift; adult/child return €6; ☞ 10.30am-1pm & 2.15-5.30pm Sat & Sun mid-Jul-mid-Aug) from Mijoux and continue up to 1533m-high Mont Rond.

Heading a further 25km southeast you hit the French-Swiss border, passing

WORTH A TRIP

CROSS-BORDER

Sleep soundly with your head in Switzerland and your feet in France at **Hôtel Franco-Suisse** (☞ 03 84 60 02 20; www.arbezje-hotel.com; La Cure; s/d/tr/q incl half board €88/127/166/254), a unique bistro inn smack on the Franco-Swiss border. Since 1920 the Arbez family has taken great pride in providing cosy rooms (some are wood-beamed alpine style) and regional cuisine like home-style chicken in *vin jaune*. Find the hotel in the hamlet of La Cure, 2.5km from Les Rousses, wedged between the Col de la Faucille (France) and Col de la Givrine (Switzerland).

through **Ferney-Voltaire** (www.ferney-voltaire.net), 5km north of Geneva, en route. Following his banishment from Switzerland in 1759, Voltaire lived in Ferney until his return to Paris and death in 1778. Guided tours of his elegant home, **Château de Voltaire** (allée du Château; adult/child €5/free;

☀tours in French hourly 10.30am-4.30pm Tue-Sun mid-May-mid-Sep), take in the château, chapel and surrounding 7-hectare park. Past visitors include Auden, Blake and Flaubert, all of whom wrote about the philosopher's home in exile.

PLAN YOUR SKI TRIP

Preplanning your ski trip pays off: sidestep school holidays to stretch your euro further, and book lift passes online to skip past the queues. And with the crème de la crème of instructors at the ubiquitous École du Ski Français, you'll go from bending zee knees to freestyle dancing on skis in no time. Here are some other tips:

» Save by buying a SnowBall Pass (www.snowballpass.com), which offers discounts on ski passes, tuition and equipment hire.

» Contact the Club Alpin Français (www.ffcam.fr) for the lowdown on *refuges* (mountain huts) and book your stay.

» Check out France Montagnes (<http://ski-resort-france.co.uk>) for Alps resort guides, maps, snow reports and more.

» Surf Piste Hors (<http://pistehors.com>) if you're planning to head off-piste.

» See p963 for recommended maps.

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